



Washington State Fusion Center INFOCUS



MONDAY — 20 DEC 2021

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HEADLINE	12/20 Foreign-born population soars; new record
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/20/foreign-born-population-soars-to-new-record-under-/
GIST	<p>The U.S. has had a massive surge in immigration this year, with as many as 1.5 million newcomers and a record 46.2 million foreign-born people, according to a report for the Center for Immigration Studies.</p> <p>After a deep trough last year, likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the travel and migration restrictions imposed to control the spread, the flow of people rebounded around the time President Biden was elected.</p> <p>In numbers never seen before, they are coming legally through airports and land border crossings and illegally across the Rio Grande and remote regions of Arizona and California.</p> <p>“There was pent-up demand for legal immigration, and illegal immigration has exploded in one of the greatest surges, if not the greatest, we’ve ever seen,” said Steven A. Camarota, the demographer who was the chief author of the report. “It’s driving the numbers up and up and up.”</p> <p>As it stands, 14.2% of the U.S. population is foreign-born, or 1 out of every 7 people. That is the highest rate of immigrants in the population since 1910, when the number was 14.7%. At current trends, the government says, the U.S. will break that record well before the end of this decade.</p> <p>Those numbers are even starker given the reversal of trends.</p> <p>The data showed a drop of 1.2 million immigrants from February to September 2020, likely the result of coronavirus restrictions blocking new entrants, even as outmigration continued. That left the population of the foreign-born — the Census Bureau’s term — at 43.8 million.</p> <p>It was up to 45 million by January and marched steadily to the current 46.2 million total shown for last month.</p> <p>In the year after President Trump’s election, the immigrant population flattened.</p> <p>Mr. Camarota said that’s proof of how much a president’s rhetoric and policies can affect the flow of people.</p> <p>Eventually, however, illegal immigrant caravans began to rush the border and the immigration population increased under Mr. Trump from late 2017 to early 2019.</p> <p>One indication that the Biden border surge is playing a role in the numbers is the large increase in Hispanic foreign-born, Mr. Camarota said. They made up 61% of the growth over the past year.</p> <p>The Center for Immigration Studies used the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, a monthly sampling of households used to produce the Labor Department’s regular unemployment data.</p> <p>The survey probes immigration status, allowing researchers to spot trends, though the sample size is smaller than tools like the American Community Survey, another census program commonly used to evaluate immigration. Current Population Survey data can show large variations month to month.</p>

Because the CPS samples people actually in the U.S., it gives a different perspective of arrival, departure and arrest calculations, and can indicate trends in legal and illegal migration that official border records don't reflect.

The most recent American Community Survey data dates to 2019. It found that more than half of immigrants had become U.S. citizens. Millions more are eligible to naturalize but have not attained citizenship.

That ACS data suggested that the illegal immigrant population was falling as part of a long-term trend.

Mr. Camarota said the latest CPS numbers suggest the situation is different now than in 2019.

He made the calculations as the Biden administration and Democrats on Capitol Hill are working to boost the flow of people and seeking to grant amnesty to illegal immigrants and open new avenues for more legal immigration.

Mr. Camarota said little attention is given to the country's ability to handle the number of immigrants.

"The fundamental question on immigration that we don't really totally seem to be able to ask, but which the numbers always raise, is what's the right number? What's the number we're able to assimilate?" he said.

"The way politicians, policymakers, always approach it, especially in the Democratic Party, is how can we help more people get in or legalize those already here. Or in the Republican Party, how can we give the business community more foreign workers," he said.

He said the numbers affect schools, health care providers and the labor market.

In 1970, the ratio of immigrants in the population was less than 1 in 20, the lowest since the census began tracking the matter in the 1800s.

As recently as 2000, the ratio was about 1 in 9. Now it stands at 1 in 7. Falling U.S. birthrates account for much of the shift.

Immigration and business advocates say that is reason alone to turn to immigration. They say the country needs the injection of workers to keep afloat the costly social insurance programs such as Medicare and Social Security. The trust funds of these programs face bankruptcy because of the drain of an aging population.

The American Business Immigration Coalition says immigration is also an answer to runaway inflation. It said passing Democrats' immigration plans would help.

"This is going to kill us in the real world, with inflation and a lack of workers in almost every field — in hospitality and health care — everywhere, we're hurting for workers," Bob Worsley, co-chair of the coalition, said at a press conference last week urging congressional action. "They need to get this done."

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HEADLINE	12/20 Return to office plans grow murkier
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/20/business/news-business-stock-market#return-to-office-postponed
GIST	New Year's Eve in Times Square is up in the air. The National Basketball Association is canceling games , as is the National Hockey League. The Rockettes are done for the Christmas season. For companies in the United States watching the headlines about the resurgent coronavirus, the news of late is unwelcome.

Last week, Apple said it was indefinitely postponing office-return plans and The [Washington Post announced](#) it was mandating booster shots and weekly testing. And over the weekend, [CNN closed its offices](#) to nonessential employees.

The rapid spread of the virus's Omicron variant continues to upend companies' plans and force changes to policies. In recent days:

- Citigroup sent a memo to its staff in New York and New Jersey giving them the option to work from home through the holidays given the surge in cases in the New York metropolitan area. JPMorgan Chase and Morgan Stanley haven't changed their policies, but staff are being given the flexibility to work from home, according to people familiar with the situation who declined to be identified discussing personnel matters.
- JPMorgan Chase's huge health care conference is going virtual. The event, set to begin on Jan. 10, is moving online "out of an abundance of caution," the bank [told attendees on Wednesday](#).
- Goldman Sachs reportedly told teams in New York to cancel holiday parties. The bank has [already held several parties](#) over the past few weeks. JPMorgan and Morgan Stanley are reportedly allowing individual teams and departments to go ahead with holiday parties (for now).
- Apple delayed its return to office "to a date yet to be determined." The company [told employees on Wednesday](#) of the change in plans after already pushing back its return date three times. It also [temporarily shut stores](#) in Annapolis, Md., Miami and Ottawa in response to a rise in coronavirus cases.
- Several Broadway shows were canceled and the Metropolitan Opera will require booster shots. The [cancellations](#) came after cast or crew members for shows, including "Hamilton," tested positive. The Met's new rule [mandating boosters for staff and audience members](#), which takes effect on Jan. 17, makes it the first major performing arts institution to introduce such a measure. "Everyone is going to be doing this," said Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager.

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HEADLINE	12/20 Employers confused over vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/business/company-vaccine-mandates-biden.html
GIST	<p>The marching orders from the Biden administration in November had seemed clear — large employers were to get their workers fully vaccinated by early next year, or make sure the workers were tested weekly. But a little over a month later, the Labor Department's vaccine rule has been swept into confusion and uncertainty by legal battles, shifting deadlines and rising Covid case counts that throw the very definition of fully vaccinated into question.</p> <p>The spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant has seemingly bolstered the government's argument, at the heart of its legal battle over the rule, that the virus remains a grave threat to workers. But the recent surge in cases has raised the issue of whether the government will take its requirements further — even as the original rule remains contentious — and ask employers to mandate booster shots, too. The country's testing capacity has also been strained, adding to concerns that companies will be unable to meet the rule's testing requirements.</p> <p>"My clients are totally confused as, quite frankly, am I," Erin McLaughlin, a labor and employment lawyer at Buchanan, Ingersoll & Rooney, said on Saturday. "My sense is that there are a lot of employers scrambling to try and put their mandate programs in place."</p> <p>No company has been spared the whirlwind of changes in the last week, set off by the spike in Covid cases that have, in some instances, cut into their work forces. Then on Friday, an appeals court lifted the legal block on the vaccine rule, though appeals to the ruling were immediately filed, leaving the rule's legal status up in the air. On Saturday, hours after the appeals court ruling, the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration urged employers to start working to get in compliance. But OSHA also gave employers some leeway, pushing back full enforcement of the rule until February, recognizing that for all its best intentions the rollout of the rule has been muddled.</p>

For companies struggling to meet OSHA's standards because of testing shortages, the Labor Department said Sunday that it would "consider refraining from enforcement" if the employer has shown a good-faith effort to comply.

The reaction of companies has been muddled as well. Over the weekend, some took the first steps in developing testing programs. Others remained in wait-and-see mode. And some employers went even further than what the government has so far required by mandating boosters, spurred by fears over the spread of Omicron.

"I was just on a call with a client who said he can't keep his work force not because of any vaccine mandate but because people keep getting sick," Ms. McLaughlin said.

Adding a layer of confusion, many states and cities have created their own vaccine rules — some more stringent than the federal government's, as in [New York](#) City, where an option to test out of vaccine requirements isn't allowed, while some, like Florida, [have sought to undermine OSHA's rule](#). There's also the question of whether companies will eventually be required to mandate boosters, which would require accommodating the six-month delay between the second and third shots.

Anthony Capone, president of the technology and health care company DocGo, which sets up Covid testing programs for employers, said he had gotten a rush of inquiries from companies this weekend that are scrambling to set up their testing programs. DocGo has roughly tripled the number of daily Covid tests it conducts in the last few weeks. Mr. Capone added that he and many of the employers he works with are anticipating resistance if they mandate boosters.

"You can't really mandate booster shots yet," he said. "It hasn't been signed off on by any federal agency."

JPMorgan Chase, whose decision to require vaccines is complicated by its sprawling retail operations across the United States, declined to comment on how the court's most recent decision, along with the recent spike in cases, affects any plans to mandate vaccines. But the bank on Friday told its American employees who do not work in bank branches that "each group should assess who needs to come into the office, work priorities and who should revert to working from home on a more regular basis over the next few weeks."

Walmart, which has mandated vaccines for mainly its corporate staff, also did not have any comment on broadening that requirement. Only 66 percent of its roughly 1.6 million U.S. employees are vaccinated, according to data compiled by the [Shift Project](#) at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

Legal questions about the OSHA rule are far from resolved. Immediately after the U.S. District Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit ruled on Friday, [several](#) of the [many plaintiffs](#) who have [challenged](#) that [rule](#) asked the Supreme Court to intervene as part of its "emergency" docket. Appeals from the Sixth Circuit are assigned for review by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who under Supreme Court rules could in theory make a decision on his own but is more likely to refer the matter to the full Supreme Court. With the Labor Department now delaying full enforcement of its rule until Feb. 9, the justices have several weeks to ask for abbreviated briefings if they want them.

"Things are going back and forth literally in a matter of hours," said Sydney Heimbrock, an adviser on industry and government issues at Qualtrics, who works with hundreds of clients on using the company's software to track employee vaccination status. "The confusion stems from the on-again-off-again, is it a rule or isn't it a rule? The litigations, appeals, reversing decisions and making decisions."

Even the spread of Omicron hasn't changed the position of some of the vaccine rule's most ardent opponents. The National Retail Federation, one of the trade groups [challenging the administration's vaccine rule](#), is among those that have filed a petition with the Supreme Court. The group is in favor of vaccinations but has pushed for companies to get more time to carry out mandates. Still, even as it fights

the administration's rule, the federation is also holding twice weekly calls with members to compare notes on how to carry it out.

"There's no question that the increased number of variants like Omicron certainly don't make it less dangerous," said Stephanie Martz, the group's chief administrative officer and general counsel. "The legitimate, remaining question is, is this inherent to the workplace?"

And employers face yet another uncertainty: Should they mandate boosters? And will they be required to?

The Labor Department said Sunday that its rule does not currently include booster shots, though it strongly encourages them. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could [change](#) its definition of what it means to be fully vaccinated. Some state governments, [including New York](#), have already indicated they plan to make the change.

That may take time, though, given the political considerations in messaging about boosters, affecting everything from holiday travel to the continued effort to increase overall vaccination rates. And some employers aren't waiting for either the courts or public health officials. Just as the Delta wave spurred the [first round of vaccine mandates](#), the Omicron variant has similarly pushed some employers to move ahead of the requirements.

The investment bank Jefferies Financial Group told employees on Dec. 8 that they had to get booster shots by the end of January after sending its more than 4,000 employees to work from home as cases jumped.

"As has been the case throughout the pandemic, we are trying our best to keep us all ahead of the curve," the Jefferies' chief executive, Rich Handler, and president, Brian Friedman, wrote in a memo to staff on Saturday, adding that they believed the health authorities would soon consider only people who have gotten boosters to be fully immunized.

But for companies with employees who may have [higher levels of vaccine hesitancy](#) — or human resources departments exhausted from [dealing with a deluge of exemption requests](#) — the process may begin more slowly. And it may only go forward if required.

United Airlines, [one of the first to mandate vaccines](#), has started "an education campaign" on booster shots. Tyson Foods has begun to offer boosters in its offices and some production facilities. And Goldman Sachs has been providing boosters at its on-site health centers for months.

"A lot of companies are having enough of a hard time mandating the vaccine at all," said Douglas Brayley, an employment lawyer at Ropes & Gray. "And so I wonder if there's some reluctance to go back to people who they already had to cajole into getting the vaccine, 'Oh, and by the way, please get one more shot.'"

Other businesses said that while they had moved more rapidly than OSHA in initially mandating vaccines, they are more open to awaiting government guidance on the question of third shots.

"As a company we try to follow what we see in the science and evidence, and we have sometimes been more aggressive than what the government has mandated," said April Koh, founder and chief executive of the mental health company Spring Health, which mandated vaccines for its 350 employees in August.

Spring Health's office is now closed, because of Omicron's spread, but Ms. Koh said as she weighs whether or when to require boosters, it could help to have the validation of government guidance. "We would get an extra level of assurance from a mandate that this is scientifically validated."

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HEADLINE	12/20 China spies have penetrated Taiwan military
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/taiwan-china-espionage/

TAIPEI – For more than 20 years, Xie Xizhang presented himself as a Hong Kong businessman on visits to Taiwan. He now stands accused of having another mission: recruiting spies for China.

On one trip in 2006, Xie met a senior retired Taiwanese navy officer, Chang Pei-ning, over a meal, according to official documents accusing the pair of espionage. Chang would become one of Xie's agents, the documents allege, helping him penetrate Taiwan's active military leadership as part of a long-running Chinese operation to build a spy ring among serving and retired military officers.

The Taiwanese officers and their families were allegedly lured by Xie's offers of all-expenses-paid trips abroad, thousands of dollars in cash payments, and gifts such as silk scarves and belts for their wives. In June 2019, counter-espionage officers moved against Xie's network, launching raids that uncovered further evidence, according to the documents, which were reviewed by Reuters. Now, Chang is facing espionage charges and a warrant has been issued for the arrest of Xie. According to a person familiar with the case, Xie is not in Taiwan.

The operation detailed in these documents shows how Beijing allegedly sought out commanders in the Taiwan military and induced them to become spies. It comes amid a series of convictions for military espionage in Taiwan in recent years. Those cases reveal that China has mounted a broader campaign to undermine the democratic island's military and civilian leadership, corrode its will to fight, extract details of high-tech weapons and gain insights into defense planning, according to senior retired Taiwanese military officers and current counter-espionage agents, as well as former U.S. military and intelligence officers with experience in Taiwan.

Taiwan's spycatchers are battling a campaign that has compromised senior officers at the heart of the island's armed forces and government agencies, a steady stream of convictions handed down in the courts shows.

Beijing has even penetrated the security detail assigned to protect Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen. A retired presidential security officer and a serving military police lieutenant colonel at the unit tasked with protecting the president had their conviction upheld earlier this year for leaking sensitive information about Tsai's security to a Chinese intelligence agency.

The information included a hand-drawn organizational chart of the Special Service Center, the unit that protects the president, according to the ruling in the High Court. The two were also charged with leaking the names, titles and work phone numbers of senior security officers guarding the Presidential Office and Tsai's residence in the heart of Taipei, according to court documents reviewed by Reuters and local media reports.

In the past decade, at least 21 serving or retired Taiwanese officers with the rank of captain or above have been convicted of spying for China, according to a Reuters review of court records and reports from Taiwan's official news agencies. At least nine other serving or retired members of the armed forces are currently on trial or being investigated on suspicion of contacts with spies from China, the review shows.

The 21 convicted officers were found guilty of recruiting spies for China or passing a range of sensitive information to China, including contact details of senior Taiwanese officers and details of Taiwan's agents in China.

The Taiwan Affairs Office in Beijing did not respond to questions from Reuters about China's espionage activities in Taiwan.

In Taipei, the Ministry of National Defense told Reuters that pro-active counter-intelligence efforts have stopped China from penetrating the military. The ministry said in a statement that it employs education campaigns to encourage and reward officers and soldiers to report initial contact with "criminals." These contacts are immediately investigated, and when there is potential for the loss of confidential information, the military acts to block any leak, the ministry said.

This effort, the ministry said, means “there has been no infiltration.”

The Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau, Taiwan’s lead spycatching agency, said it had no comment on ongoing legal matters.

Other arms of the Taiwanese government, however, greet the spying with alarm. Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council told Reuters in a statement that China’s “unceasing expansion of espionage” is one of the “malicious political operations” that Beijing is conducting, undermining “the normal development of cross-strait relations.”

Well-placed spies in the ranks of the Taiwan military could offer a priceless advantage to China if the two sides plunge into open conflict, according to Taiwanese and U.S. military analysts. Tensions have risen sharply this year. China’s military is intensifying its gray-zone warfare against the island, a campaign of menacing air and sea patrols that falls short of open warfare. The People’s Liberation Army is also steadily accumulating the firepower required to seize Taiwan and prevent the United States from intervening.

The ruling Communist Party in Beijing regards Taiwan as a Chinese province that must be unified with the mainland. President Xi Jinping says China would prefer peaceful unification but refuses to rule out force. President Tsai says Taiwan is an independent country called the Republic of China, its official name, and has vowed to defend its democracy and freedom.

“China is conducting a very targeted infiltration effort towards Taiwan,” said retired Taiwanese navy Lieutenant Commander Lu Li-shih. Espionage cases, he said, show that Beijing has compromised almost all ranks, including top-level generals, despite intensive internal education campaigns in the military warning of the dangers of Beijing’s espionage efforts.

Lu, who has studied Chinese spying operations, said Beijing’s agents often begin softening their targets with offers of small gifts, drinks and meals. Handlers typically pay richly for the first piece of secret information extracted from current or retired officers, Lu said. This payment would later be used to blackmail them into supplying further intelligence at a much lower price, he said.

A POWERFUL WEAPON

This year alone, Taiwanese courts have upheld the convictions of the two men who revealed secrets about President Tsai’s security and found a retired lieutenant colonel from the armaments bureau guilty of building espionage networks for China. A retired major general and three retired colonels from the Military Intelligence Bureau are on trial for allegedly recruiting spies for China. Reuters was unable to reach the defendants and their lawyers in these cases for comment.

In July, [Taiwan’s Mirror Media reported](#) that the island’s former deputy defense minister, General Chang Che-ping, was questioned in a national security investigation.

Three people familiar with the matter confirmed a probe is under way. Two of the people told Reuters that General Chang was being questioned for having had contacts with Xie Xizhang – the alleged Chinese agent who presented himself as a Hong Kong businessman. The defense ministry said Chang had been interviewed as a witness in the case.

Contacted by Reuters, Chang replied: “Inconvenient to comment. Hope you understand.”

According to the official documents reviewed by Reuters, Xie allegedly reported to an office that is part of the Chinese Communist Party’s intelligence apparatus and serves as a front for China’s Central Military Commission. President Xi chairs the commission, which is China’s top military decision-making body.

General Chang, Taiwan’s highest-ranking air force general, is now head of the National Defense University. When the media reports of the probe emerged, Chang issued [a statement calling them “far-fetched.”](#) He said he had “not talked about military matters without permission.”

The Taipei district prosecutors office said it doesn't discuss ongoing investigations.

Espionage has long been a powerful weapon for the Chinese Communist Party. In the Chinese civil war, Communist agents and sympathizers played a key role in defeating the forces of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT), or nationalist party, under Chiang Kai-shek, forcing a retreat to Taiwan. In some instances, entire KMT formations were persuaded to change sides and joined the Communists under Mao Zedong, according to multiple accounts of that conflict.

The series of convictions in Taiwanese courts shows cultivating disloyalty in the military remains a high priority for Beijing. Despite China's vastly stronger forces and [serious shortcomings in Taiwan's military](#), the island remains a tough target for invasion. Even without outside assistance, Taiwan's best-trained troops could inflict heavy losses by exploiting well-prepared positions, rugged terrain and the vulnerability of an invasion fleet crossing the Taiwan Strait, say Taiwanese and U.S. military analysts.

For Chinese invaders, advance knowledge of defensive plans, communication codes, weapons sites and troop locations would offset some of these difficulties, according to these analysts. Disloyal officers might also refuse to fight, misdirect their troops or defect to the attackers.

In a report released in September about the Chinese military, Taiwan's defense ministry acknowledged that in an attack, agents for China "lurking" on the island could strike at command centers to "decapitate" Taiwan's military and political leadership and demoralize its armed forces.

Even the discovery of Chinese spies in peacetime is a potentially demoralizing blow to Taiwan. "The repeated cases of the most senior level of Taiwan armed forces officers being convicted of espionage has got to have a psychological effect on the officer corps and in the ranks," said Grant Newsham, a retired U.S. Marine Corps colonel who has studied the island's defense capabilities. "And, once you can create doubt in the honesty of one's leaders, the rot sets in and deepens."

One retired high-ranking officer in Taiwan agreed: Colleagues lose confidence in one another, this person said, and "you make allies lose confidence in you."

Some Taiwanese military veterans worry that the repeated espionage cases will make the United States, the island's main ally, unwilling to share advanced weapons or sensitive intelligence for fear of these secrets leaking to Beijing.

"We can't blame other people. We are the cause of the problem," said Lu, the retired navy lieutenant commander.

Asked about the potential loss of faith in Washington, Taiwan's defense ministry said there had been no disruption to normal ties with friendly countries. The U.S. National Security Council declined to comment for this story.

Beijing has succeeded in recruiting spies from the island's armed forces despite strenuous efforts by the Taiwanese military's Counter Intelligence and Security Division to alert troops to the danger of Chinese agents. The military even produces soap operas, sometimes starring serving members of the armed forces, with scripts that echo previous spy cases. The soaps are part of an hour-long television program broadcast every Thursday afternoon that is mandatory viewing for all serving officers and soldiers.

In an episode late last year, a staff sergeant working in communications in a combat unit meets a woman in a bar who claimed to work for an investment firm in the defense industry. They start a relationship, and the woman begins to ask for sensitive information. To impress her, the staff sergeant gives her data on missiles at air bases in northern Taiwan. Later he grows suspicious and refuses her further requests, but she threatens to blackmail him with a recording of his earlier indiscretion. The woman is later arrested.

The scene switches to a man who appears to be the woman's spymaster. On the wall in front of him are clips from Chinese newspapers, including a photograph of Chinese President Xi. "That's alright," the handler says, tearing up a photograph of the woman. "We have plenty of other opportunities."

To reinforce the message, posters and signs on bases exhort Taiwanese soldiers to remain vigilant. Stickers with the number of a hotline for reporting suspected spies have been posted above some urinals. Packs of tissues handed out to troops carry a notice promising a reward of T\$5 million (\$180,000) for successfully exposing a spy.

WOOLING VETERAN COMMANDERS

While Taiwan battles Chinese espionage, it also spies on China as part of a decades-long effort to understand Beijing's intentions, according to current and retired Taiwanese officers and official documents reviewed by Reuters. China's official media periodically announces the discovery of Taiwanese spy networks and the arrest of alleged agents.

In October last year, China's state television broadcaster, CCTV, reported that a Taiwanese academic arrested in China, Cheng Yu-chin, had confessed to spying. The same month, CCTV reported the arrest of Lee Meng-chu, alleging he was an active member of a Taiwan separatist group who posed as a businessman to conceal his espionage role. Lee was arrested when he entered China and was found to have photographs and videos of Chinese military drills in the city of Shenzhen, as well as materials showing he supported the protests in Hong Kong, the report said.

Cheng and Lee could not be reached by Reuters. Asked about their arrests, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council said that Chinese authorities are "arbitrarily arresting our people who engage in cross-strait exchanges" and using official media "to fabricate fictional crimes."

In its campaign to subvert Taiwan's military, Beijing has also mounted a longstanding operation to woo senior retired commanders with historic ties to China. These efforts exploit political divisions that have widened in Taiwan over the past two decades between Tsai's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the main opposition KMT.

The DPP has gained ground with the support of a younger generation that increasingly identifies as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. The KMT, born in China, holds to its old dream of eventually reunifying a free and democratic country. The party also supports closer relations with Beijing, but has denounced the Communist Party's threats against Taiwan.

Many of Taiwan's older, retired military officers support the KMT, which ruled the island before it became a democracy and now vies with the DPP for power. Most of these veterans don't back the Communist Party, but both the KMT and Beijing share the dream of a single China, even if they have different visions of what that means. Some have been welcomed to China to attend seminars and receptions with retired counterparts from the Chinese military.

Though no longer in uniform, these officers still retain influence over a military that is deeply hierarchical, with long-standing networks of patronage and personal loyalty, according to current and former U.S. officials with extensive experience of the Taiwan military.

In November 2016, Beijing scored a dramatic propaganda victory when more than 30 retired Taiwanese generals were seen attending a speech by President Xi at Beijing's Great Hall of the People. The visitors stood for China's national anthem, Taiwan's official Central News Agency reported. The event, broadcast on Chinese state television, sparked an outcry in Taiwan.

One of the retired generals in the audience was Wu Sz-huai, who is now a KMT lawmaker. He apologized in 2019, saying he was unaware that Xi was hosting the event and would have declined to attend if he had known. He said members of the delegation stood for the national anthem but did not sing. Wu declined to comment for this report.

In its statement, Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council called on "retired high-ranking generals to maintain the dignity of the country and pay attention to their own words, deeds and the perceptions of society."

In the aftermath of the visit, Taiwan's parliament tightened the rules on retired officers' trips to China. The new penalties include fines of up to T\$10 million (\$360,000) and the cancellation of pensions for retired senior officers and government officials who attend Chinese political events or "salute" Communist Party flags or symbols.

Some senior retired Taiwanese officers told Reuters that these trips to China hurt the military's image. But they added that a younger generation of officers now rising through the ranks would not be as susceptible to appeals for a unified China that includes Taiwan.

FREE TRIPS ABROAD

One major challenge for Taiwan's counter-espionage forces is light penalties for retired officers convicted of spying. Under military law, serving officers can be sentenced to death or life imprisonment for serious offenses. However, former officers who commit crimes once out of uniform can only be tried under the National Security Law, which prescribes much shorter jail terms.

Under public pressure to counter Chinese spying, parliament in June 2019 increased penalties under the security law for the most severe crimes, from a maximum of five years imprisonment to a minimum of seven years and fines of up to T\$100 million (about \$3.6 million).

The case of alleged Chinese spy Xie Xizhang was first reported earlier this year by local media, but the official documents seen by Reuters provide new details. Xie is accused of inviting current and retired Taiwanese military officers to drinks, banquets and sporting events in a bid to win their friendship and trust, according to the documents.

The operation also allegedly relied on enticing prospective Taiwanese spies to accept free overseas trips where they would meet their Chinese handlers and other Communist Party officials. The official documents allege that six serving and retired officers received all-expenses-paid trips to South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, as well as Chinese cities including Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Macau.

A key objective of the alleged operation was to recruit officers in leading combat units, according to the official documents. In 2008, Chang Pei-ning, the retired navy officer, allegedly introduced Xie to a senior serving Taiwanese Navy officer, Captain Ho Chung-chi, and Ho's wife, Chuang Hsiu-yun. In the years that followed, Ho and his wife, working under Xie's guidance, allegedly recruited other officers.

Chang, Ho and Chuang were charged under the National Security Law in November 2019 for recruiting a spy ring for China. The three are currently on trial, according to a spokesperson for the Kaohsiung District Court.

Taiwan's defense ministry said Chang and Ho had retired before they allegedly became involved in the case. However, official documents accusing the pair of espionage allege that Ho met Xie on multiple occasions before his retirement in August 2015.

Reuters spoke to Ho at his home in Kaohsiung. He declined to comment and said his wife had no comment. Chang didn't respond to a request for comment left at his home in Kaohsiung.

In a post on his Facebook page when he retired, Ho bid farewell to his navy comrades: "Time to say goodbye!" The post included a picture of a folded Navy uniform, officer's hat, medals and badges.

The message generated hundreds of likes and comments. "Captain," wrote one well-wisher. "Thank you for your years of service to the country and the navy!"

HEADLINE	12/20 Cruise ship docks in Miami: 48 test positive
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/cruise-ship-royal-caribbean-covid/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN) — Despite stringent measures supposed to keep ocean cruises Covid-free, operator Royal Caribbean says at least 48 people on board one of its ships that docked in Miami at the weekend have tested positive for the virus.</p> <p>The Symphony of the Seas, the world's biggest cruise ship, was carrying more than 6,000 passengers and crew on a week-long journey around the Caribbean when a guest tested positive, prompting wider contact tracing, according to Royal Caribbean.</p> <p>Cruise ships had been touted as the one of the "safest" vacations available back in summer 2021 when the cruise industry restarted in the US with new Covid protocols, following an extensive pandemic shutdown.</p> <p>The Symphony of the Seas was carrying 6,091 passengers and crew members. In a statement, Royal Caribbean said that a guest tested positive during the voyage, and subsequent cases were detected following contact tracing.</p> <p>It said 95% on board were fully vaccinated. Of the people who've since tested positive, 98% were fully vaccinated. It's not yet known whether the highly infectious Omicron variant of coronavirus, currently spreading rapidly around the world, was responsible for the cases detected.</p> <p>Royal Caribbean rules dictate that all travelers on board a ship aged 12 and above must be fully vaccinated, and test negative before departure. The cruise line says it "strongly recommends" guests receive a booster dose prior to sailing, but this is not currently mandated.</p> <p>Crew members are also required to be fully vaccinated and test "at least once a week."</p> <p>Unvaccinated children on board Symphony of the Seas were required to show a negative PCR, and also test negative at the terminal pre-departure.</p> <p>'Mild symptoms'</p> <p>Royal Caribbean says it also implements additional health and safety measures, such as enhanced cleaning. On US-based cruises, masks are now required to be worn in indoor public areas -- this policy was recently updated to extend mask-wearing requirements for fully vaccinated passengers.</p> <p>"Each person quickly went into quarantine," reads a Royal Caribbean statement on the Symphony of the Seas outbreak. "Everyone who tested positive were asymptomatic or had mild symptoms, and we continuously monitored their health."</p> <p>Symphony of the Seas departed from Miami, Florida on December 11, stopping at Caribbean ports St. Maarten and St. Thomas, as well as Royal Caribbean's private island, called CocoCay.</p> <p>The cruise line says in its statement that it disembarked six positive cases earlier in the cruise, while the other positive travelers disembarked on December 18, when the voyage came to an end.</p> <p>The cruise line added that Symphony of the Seas' future voyages weren't impacted.</p> <p>Earlier in December, a spate of positive Covid cases were reported on board Norwegian Cruise Line ship Breakaway, which was traveling out of New Orleans.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/20 Nigeria: gunmen kill 47 in rural northwest
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/gunmen-kill-47-latest-attacks-nigerias-troubled-north-81853096

GIST	<p>LAGOS, Nigeria -- Nigerian security forces are searching for armed gangs who killed 47 people in attacks in recent days in rural areas of the country's northwest, the latest killings in the troubled region.</p> <p>The attacks took place in the northwest Kaduna state which neighbors Nigeria's capital city, Abuja, Kaduna commissioner for security Samuel Aruwan confirmed.</p> <p>No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks but they are suspected to be by the gangs of bandits who have killed at least 2,500 people in the northwest and central states so far in 2021, according to statistics collated by the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations. The attacks have escalated in the past three months so the death toll for the entire year is expected to increase.</p> <p>The armed groups mostly consist of young men from the Fulani ethnic group who had traditionally worked as nomadic cattle herders and have become caught up in a decades-long conflict with Hausa farming communities over access to water and grazing land.</p> <p>Security forces deployed after the attacks are patrolling the affected areas, but no arrests have been announced and details are still emerging. Local residents reported that the assailants rampaged for hours in some of the villages.</p> <p>Nine people were killed across three villages on Friday, according to Kaduna commissioner Aruwan, a reminder of how the armed groups are able to carry out prolonged assaults in remote locations where help is often delayed as a result of inadequate security presence.</p> <p>Another 38 people were killed on Sunday by assailants in another part of Kaduna, Aruwan confirmed.</p> <p>Houses, trucks, and cars were burned, along with agricultural produce at some farms, he said.</p> <p>The ongoing violence in Nigeria's troubled northwestern region has defied measures introduced by authorities including the deployment of thousands of security forces to restore peace in violent hotspots and the recent designation of the armed groups as terrorist organizations.</p> <p>Part of the problem is that Nigeria's military is already overstretched in a decade-long war against Islamic extremist rebels in the northeast region. The rebels of Boko Haram and its offshoot, the Islamic State in West Africa Province are reported to have infiltrated the armed bandits of the northwest as they seek to expand their influence and control, according to local authorities.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Seattle to remove more homeless camps
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/city-clear-homeless-encampment-green-lake-park-beginning-monday/3IXLUX6MHNFBGKDPMFSVUEMGU/
GIST	<p>EATTLE — Encampments at Green Lake Park and a small portion of Woodland Park will be removed starting Dec. 20 following several months of outreach efforts, according to Mayor Durkan's office.</p> <p>Seattle Parks and Recreation staff posted notices at the park on Saturday that stated any remaining or abandoned belongings at the park must be removed by Monday.</p> <p>Portions of the park will be designated as active work areas on Monday as crews address damage to the park, remediate any environmental impacts of the encampment and address backlogged maintenance.</p> <p>The city of Seattle and its partners began coordinated outreach and engagement efforts at the park in September, with the goal of getting anyone residing in the park long-term on a path towards permanent housing. Since Oct. 12, these efforts have resulted in at least 15 referrals to shelter.</p>

	<p>In October, Seattle Public Utilities staff assessed the area around West Green Lake Way N, which had approximately a dozen RVs, and determined a need for remediation based on public health and safety concerns.</p> <p>RVs that are abandoned or pose a serious public health or safety risk may be towed beginning Dec. 20.</p> <p>SPU staff will be removing trash and debris in this area and the street may be closed for parts of the day on Monday while this work is occurring. Temporary no-parking signs have also been posted in the area.</p> <p>Any new tents set up at Green Lake Park will be asked to leave.</p> <p>SPR has been successful at keeping other Seattle parks encampment-free, including Denny Park and Cal Anderson Park, following similar outreach efforts and referrals to shelter prior to encampment removal.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron surge expected in holiday rush
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/omicron-surge-expected-in-western-washington-during-holiday-rush
GIST	<p>With just a week until Christmas, public health officials are warning that Western Washington could see “an astonishing surge” in COVID-19 cases because of the highly-infectious omicron variant.</p> <p>The latest numbers from UW Virology show that nearly 50 percent of samples they are studying from Washington involve the omicron variant.</p> <p>There are new warnings for everyone to do their part to help prevent the spread.</p> <p>Still, our malls and airports are busier than they’ve been in months.</p> <p>The countdown to Christmas is on. And many people are taking to the skies before Dec. 25.</p> <p>Cameron Cummings says his plane was packed with people. He’s in town visiting his family on Mercer Island.</p> <p>"I’m flying from Boston. I took a direct flight," said Cummings. "I'm pretty sure it was completely full."</p> <p>King County Public Health authorities are now urging people to prepare for a surge of omicron COVID-19 cases. The variant may spread more easily and large-scale outbreaks could occur.</p> <p>“It definitely feels scarier this week than last week with the very recent news about omicron,” said Cummings. "I’m absolutely concerned. Hence, the double mask."</p> <p>Sharon and Lawrence Lucas are heading out of town for a quick trip right before Christmas. They, too, are keenly aware of omicron concerns.</p> <p>“I plan to keep my mask on. We’re both boosted, and two vaccines. I’m still worried about it keeping track of it,” said Lawrence Lucas.</p> <p>Local malls and airports will be packed these next few days. Public health experts encourage you to avoid crowded indoor spaces and to limit the number of holiday gatherings you attend.</p> <p>“The omicron outbreak is no longer theoretical. It’s real, it’s here, and it’s moving fast,” said King County Public Health Officer Jeff Duchin.</p> <p>UW Virology now says about 50 percent of the cases it's studying in the state are likely linked to omicron.</p>

	<p>Despite the latest developments, the parking lot is packed at Westfield Southcenter mall and so are the stores.</p> <p>Fin Tinae went to the mall two days in a row.</p> <p>"I'm trying to be the best Santa I can be," said Tinae.</p> <p>He's vaccinated, staying masked up, and says he's not really worried about big gatherings or crowds at the mall or anywhere else.</p> <p>"The way I see it, as long as we take care of ourselves, we're good. As long as we stay considerate of other people's space, we're good," said Tinae.</p> <p>State health leaders believe the best way to battle COVID-19 and the omicron variant is to get vaccinated.</p> <p>They remind everyone to get vaccinated and get their booster and wear a high-quality mask and limit indoor gatherings to slow the spread.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/20 UK omicron deaths rise to 12
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-says-12-deaths-104-people-hospitalised-by-omicron-2021-12-20/
GIST	<p>LONDON, Dec 20 (Reuters) - Twelve people in Britain have died with the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, Britain's Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab said on Monday, refusing to rule out a tightening of social restrictions before Christmas.</p> <p>Britain has reported record levels of COVID-19 cases, with officials and ministers warning that the full effects of the latest wave are still yet to be seen.</p> <p>Omicron, first detected last month in southern Africa and Hong Kong, has raced around the globe and so far been reported in at least 89 countries. It is known to be very transmissible, but the severity of illness it causes remains unclear.</p> <p>In addition to the 12 deaths, Raab said 104 people were currently in hospital with Omicron. Officials warned last week that hospitalisations could hit new highs as the effects of the latest surge work their way through the population.</p> <p>Asked whether the government would impose further restrictions before Christmas, Raab told Times Radio: "I just can't make hard and fast guarantees."</p> <p>"In assessing the situation we rely very heavily on the real data coming through and it will take a little bit more time to assess this critical issue of the severity of Omicron."</p> <p>Any decision to limit how people can celebrate Christmas would come at a high political cost for Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose authority has been undermined by questions over whether he and his staff broke lockdown rules last year.</p> <p>Johnson also suffered a huge rebellion in parliament last week as lawmakers from his own party pushed back hard against a tightening of COVID-19 rules.</p> <p>To pass the new rules, which included ordering people to wear masks in public places, Johnson had to rely on the support of the main opposition Labour Party.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/20 Hamas plays long game in Gaza
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/business-africa-israel-egypt-global-trade-b91f2f2191ab04324a55adb5a1454e3a

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Each month, hundreds of trucks heavy with fuel, cement and other goods cross a plowed no man's land between Egypt and the Gaza Strip — and Hamas becomes stronger.

Hamas collects tens of millions of dollars a month in taxes and customs at the crossing in the border town of Rafah, according to estimates. The funds help it operate a government and powerful armed wing while international aid covers most of the basic needs of Gaza's 2 million residents.

That this is happening with the quiet acquiescence of Israel, which considers Hamas a terrorist group, might come as a surprise.

Israel says it works with Egypt to supervise Rafah in return for quiet. The opening of the crossing "was a common interest for all parties to ensure a lifeline for Hamas that would enable it to maintain calm in Gaza and prevent an explosion," said Mohammed Abu Jayyab, an economist and editor-in-chief of a business daily in Gaza.

But there's more to it. After surviving four wars and a nearly 15-year blockade, Hamas has only become more resilient, and Israel has been forced to accept that its sworn enemy is here to stay.

It has largely accepted Hamas' rule in Gaza because a prolonged invasion is seen as too costly. At the same time, Hamas furnishes Israeli leaders with a convenient boogeyman -- how can the Palestinians be allowed statehood if they are divided between two governments, one of which steadfastly opposes Israel's very existence?

Meanwhile, Hamas' willingness to use violence — in the form of rockets, protests along the border or incendiary balloons — has helped it to wrest concessions from Israel.

"Hamas stuck to its position and the Israeli government made a lot of compromises" after the war in May, said Omar Shaban, a Gaza-based political analyst. "Hamas was stubborn."

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MILLIONS EACH MONTH

After Hamas seized power from the Palestinian Authority in 2007, Israel and Egypt imposed a punishing blockade. A massive economy based on smuggling tunnels sprang up in and around Rafah. Hamas levied taxes on goods that were brought in.

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi ordered the tunnels destroyed after leading the 2013 overthrow of an Islamist government that had been sympathetic to Hamas. But four years and another Gaza war later, Egypt agreed to Hamas' demands to open an above-ground commercial crossing.

Imports through Gaza's only other functioning commercial crossing — with Israel — are already taxed by Israeli authorities, who transfer some of the revenues to the Palestinian Authority, so Hamas can only exact small tariffs without noticeably inflating prices. Rafah belongs to Hamas.

Hamas does not release figures on public revenues or expenses. An Egyptian government media officer did not respond to a request for comment.

Some 2,000 truckloads of cement, fuel and other goods entered through Rafah in September, nearly twice the monthly average in 2019 and 2020, according to Gisha, an Israeli rights group that closely monitors the Gaza closures.

Rami Abu Rish, the managing director of the crossings at the Hamas-run Economy Ministry — who used to supervise tax collection from the tunnels — says authorities derive no more than \$1 million a month from the Israeli crossing and up to \$6 million from Rafah.

But the Palestinian Authority's Finance Ministry estimates Hamas derives as much as \$30 million a month, mainly from taxes on fuel and tobacco coming in through Rafah, according to an official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal figures.

A cigarette importer in Gaza -- who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of jeopardizing the trade said a small group of merchants imports 9,000 to 15,000 crates of cigarettes through Rafah each month, with Hamas charging \$1,000 to \$2,000 per crate. That alone would bring in \$18 million on average.

Abu Jayyab, the Gaza economist, estimates Hamas makes up to \$27 million a month. That's in addition to taxes and customs paid on cement and fuel.

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HAMAS AND ISRAEL

Israel refuses to talk to Hamas, but over the last decade it has negotiated a series of informal cease-fires through Egyptian, Qatari and U.N. mediators in which it has eased the blockade in return for calm.

Naftali Bennett was an outspoken critic of the previous government's policy of allowing Qatar to send suitcases of cash into Gaza through an Israeli crossing.

But within months of Bennett becoming prime minister, the payments to needy families resumed through a U.N.-run voucher system, and Qatar resumed its contribution to the Hamas-run government's payroll in the form of fuel.

Israel denies it has given in to Hamas' demands. The new government says it has modified policies to try to ensure that humanitarian aid bypasses Hamas while responding militarily to even minor attacks.

All construction materials — including those brought in through Rafah — are imported through a monitoring system established with the U.N. and the PA after the 2014 war. Israel says it is barring all new, large construction projects until a deal is reached to return two captives and the remains of two Israeli soldiers held by Hamas since 2014.

Restrictions on so-called dual-use items that could be used for military purposes are in place at both the Israeli and Egyptian crossings, said Abu Rish, the Hamas crossing official.

A senior Israeli Defense Ministry official said the goal is to maximize humanitarian aid while minimizing the risk that it benefits Hamas. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, would only say that Israel is aware of the Rafah imports, and is relying on Egypt to ensure that the same restrictions are in place there as there are at the Israeli crossing.

Even as Hamas generates revenue for its government and from the crossings and taxing businesses, the international community sustains the people of Gaza.

U.N. agencies have spent more than \$4.5 billion in Gaza since 2014, including \$600 million in 2020 alone. Most of that funding goes through the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, which provides food aid, health services and operates schools for some 280,000 children.

The wealthy Gulf state of Qatar has sent \$1.3 billion to Gaza since 2012 to fund reconstruction and health services, including \$500 million pledged after the May war.

Hamas isn't going anywhere. And Israel knows it.

"They are facing a number of problems here," Abusada said. "But resilience is part of their strategy. They're not going to give up."

HEADLINE	12/17 Study: Covid twice as prevalent as feared
SOURCE	https://www.studyfinds.org/covid-patients-no-symptoms/
GIST	<p>BEIJING, China — Four in 10 COVID-19 patients are asymptomatic carriers of the virus responsible for over 800,000 deaths in the United States, a new study warns. Researchers from China say a global study of almost 30 million people found “silent” cases of the virus are twice as prevalent than previous estimates feared.</p> <p>The results show 40.5 percent of the confirmed cases of the illness are among people who show no symptoms of the infection at all. Rates rose among certain groups including pregnant women (54%), air and cruise travelers (53%), and care home residents or staff (48%).</p> <p>“The high percentage of asymptomatic infections highlights the potential transmission risk of asymptomatic infections in communities,” corresponding author Professor Min Liu of Peking University writes in the journal JAMA Network Open.</p> <p>The data shows 4.5 percent of undiagnosed care home residents or staff had the coronavirus without displaying symptoms. Typical signs of infection include fever, cough, loss of taste or smell, fatigue, and shortness of breath. The findings also apply to over one in 50 pregnant women and air or cruise travelers.</p> <p>“This finding of a high percentage of asymptomatic infections among air or cruise travelers suggests that screening and quarantine on airport arrival is important for reducing community transmissions, especially in countries without local transmission,” Prof. Liu’s team writes.</p> <p>COVID spreading silently in hospitals?</p> <p>The results come from a review of 95 studies involving 29,776,306 individuals from across the world. Overall, the number of asymptomatic infections among tested populations was relatively low — 0.25 percent or one in every 400 people.</p> <p>However, this rate soared to nearly 40 percent among those testing positive for the virus. Earlier evidence suggested one in five infected people experience no symptoms and are less likely to spread COVID than their visibly sick peers.</p> <p>“These findings suggest that asymptomatic infections might contribute to the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 within the community,” Prof Liu says.</p> <p>Study authors are calling for increased and regular testing, especially in specific industries such as air travel.</p> <p>“In addition, we found that approximately one-third of individuals with confirmed COVID-19 were asymptomatic among health care workers or in-hospital patients,” Prof. Liu continues.</p> <p>“Because asymptomatic health care workers might contribute to disease spread in and out of hospitals, surveillance of asymptomatic individuals is important for infection control and transmission reduction in health care settings and community. Meanwhile, hand hygiene and personal protective equipment were necessary for hospital visitors.”</p> <p>Younger patients more likely to be asymptomatic</p> <p>The meta-analysis also found those under the age of 39 were most likely to be asymptomatic, confirming previous research.</p> <p>“This indicated that young adults who often presented mild or no symptoms were a potential source of transmission in the community,” study authors write.</p> <p>The study is the biggest and most updated of its kind, covering Europe, the U.S., Africa, Asia, and South America. It included 19,884 people with a confirmed COVID-19 infection, with 11,069 being asymptomatic.</p>

	<p>“Our results could raise awareness among the public and policy makers and provide evidence for prevention strategies,” Prof. Liu says.</p> <p>“Screening for asymptomatic infection is required, especially for countries and regions that have successfully controlled SARS-CoV-2. Asymptomatic infections should be under management similar to that for confirmed infections, including isolating and contact tracing.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/20 Growing threats to global economy
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/20/investing/markets-stocks-oil/index.html
GIST	<p>London (CNN Business) Investors hoping for an easy Christmas week could be sorely disappointed as stocks and oil prices tumble in the face of growing threats to the global economy.</p> <p>Dow futures fell 575 points — or more than 1.6% — by 5 a.m. ET on Monday, while benchmark Brent crude was down about 3% at \$71 a barrel. Major stock market indexes in Europe and Asia fell by around 2%, although the Shanghai Composite fared slightly better, drawing modest support from a Chinese interest rate cut.</p> <p>Two factors appeared to be driving the sharp sell-off.</p> <p>Soaring cases of the Omicron variant in Europe and the United States are already slamming businesses and forcing governments to tighten restrictions on activity at a critical time of year for the leisure and retail industries. And the prospects for the US economy dimmed after Democrat Sen. Joe Manchin said he would oppose the Biden administration's \$1.75 trillion "Build Back Better" bill.</p> <p>"A combination of increasing Omicron nerves, particularly in the UK and Europe, and the failure of President Biden's spending plan... has seen Asian equities head directly south in sympathy with Wall Street's Friday finish," wrote Jeffrey Halley, senior market analyst, Asia Pacific, at Oanda.</p> <p>Goldman Sachs wasted no time in slashing its growth forecast for the US economy in the wake of Manchin's pronouncement on Fox News on Sunday. The Wall Street firm told clients it no longer assumes President Joe Biden's signature legislation will get through Congress.</p> <p>Citing the "apparent demise" of Build Back Better, Goldman Sachs now expects US GDP to grow at an annualized pace of 2% in the first quarter, down from 3% previously.</p> <p>Adding to the gathering gloom is the threat that Omicron poses to business. The highly-transmissible variant had been identified in at least 45 US states as of Sunday, as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. And with Delta still present, Covid-19 cases are rising in some areas. New York set a new record for single-day Covid-19 cases for a third consecutive day Sunday, according to Gov. Kathy Hochul's office.</p> <p>Omicron is also spreading fast in Europe, prompting governments across the region to introduce new measures restricting travel and social activity. The Netherlands introduced a strict lockdown on Sunday, while France said Friday it would ban large outdoor events and gatherings on New Year's Eve. Denmark has closed cinemas and theaters, and limited the numbers of people in shops this week.</p> <p>Germany, the region's biggest economy, is already teetering on the brink of recession.</p> <p>"Even if booster shots are effective at reducing the medical risks, a rapid spread of Omicron could still overburden health systems and force countries to follow the Netherlands and adopt more economically damaging restrictions," Berenberg chief economist Holger Schmieding wrote in a research note on Monday.</p> <p>If that were to happen, the eurozone and the United Kingdom could both see their economies shrink by 1% in the first quarter of 2022, compared with the final three months of this year, he added.</p>

UK Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab told Sky News on Monday that he could not rule out further Covid-19 restrictions being implemented before Christmas in England.

In London, some [bars and restaurants](#) have been forced to shut down because of rising infections among staff and a collapse in customer numbers. Six English Premier League soccer matches were postponed over the weekend because of player absences due to Covid-19.

China is already experiencing a major economic slowdown, buffeted by a real estate crisis, a crackdown on private enterprise, outbreaks of Covid-19 that have disrupted manufacturing and shipping, and a power crunch. Analysts say the world's second biggest economy could grow at its slowest pace since 1990 next year.

The People's Bank of China trimmed its benchmark loan prime interest rate for the first time in 20 months on Monday, but stock market relief quickly evaporated.

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HEADLINE	12/20 Experts warn: 'grim beginning' to new year
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/20/health/us-coronavirus-monday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)With the Delta and Omicron coronavirus variants spreading across the nation as the new year approaches, health experts are urging Americans to get vaccinated or boosted to protect themselves and others before they face greater chances of infection.</p> <p>Airport travel before Christmas is up by nearly double from a year ago, according to Transportation Security Administration data, with more than two million people screened each day from December 16-18. And the indoor gatherings among friends and family that highlight the holiday season could ultimately infect more who are at higher risk for Covid-19 complications.</p> <p>"We're all anticipating with Delta, with all the travel that we're doing and all these holiday get-togethers, the beginnings of Omicron and its spread as well as ... influenza also making its appearance, we could be in for an ominous winter season and a kind of grim beginning of the new year," Dr. William Schaffner, a professor in the Division of Infectious Diseases at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, told CNN's Jim Acosta Sunday.</p> <p>Covid-19 hospitalizations trended upward over the past month as medical facilities in some parts of the country have been inundated with patients infected with the Delta variant. Now, the presence of Omicron - which scientists believe to be more contagious though most cases so far appear to be mild -- may push some strained health care systems to the brink.</p> <p>"It is quite likely that we are going to see in some sections of the country, a significant stress on the hospital system as well as on the health care workers who are getting exhausted by all of this," NIAID director Dr. Anthony Fauci told ABC's "This Week" Sunday, noting that a more transmissible form of Covid-19, such as Omicron, will have a greater impact on the tens of millions of Americans who have not been vaccinated.</p> <p>Fauci has said traveling and gathering for Christmas and New Year's can be done safely among those who are inoculated, and getting booster shots into the arms of vaccinated Americans remains paramount to increase antibody response.</p> <p>"If we're going to deal with Omicron successfully, vaccinated people need to get boosted," Fauci told NBC Sunday.</p> <p>Recent data is demonstrating the potential dangers of remaining unvaccinated, including a 10-times greater risk of testing positive and 20-times greater risk of dying from Covid-19 than those vaccinated and boosted, according to US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data through October.</p>

"Omicron has thrown a curveball" in the fight against Covid-19, former Food and Drug Administration commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb said Sunday, and everyone -- especially those around unvaccinated or higher-risk individuals -- needs to take precautions.

"A lot of people don't want to be linked in a train of transmission that could get to a vulnerable person, so we should be prudent over the next four to six weeks," he told CBS' "Face the Nation."

For any individual with a known exposure to Covid-19, Dr. Richina Bicette-McCain, a medical director at Baylor College of Medicine, reiterated [CDC guidelines](#) that those vaccinated and without symptoms can isolate and wait a few days before being tested. But for those not vaccinated who have yet to get tested, it is critical to find out whether they are infected before visiting others for the holidays.

"If you've been exposed and have not tested negative, please do not go travel and potentially expose other people," she told CNN's Pamela Brown Sunday.

President Joe Biden is set to meet with his Covid-19 response team Monday. He will [address the nation](#) Tuesday regarding the latest developments with Omicron and to issue another "stark warning of what the winter will look like for Americans who choose to remain unvaccinated," the White House said.

States responding to outbreaks

Omicron has [been identified](#) in at least 45 US states as of Sunday, according to state officials in their respective states, as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. And with Delta still present, cases in some areas are rising.

New York -- which was among the hardest-hit states at the beginning of the pandemic -- set a new record for single-day Covid-19 cases for a [third consecutive day](#) Sunday, according to Gov. Kathy Hochul's office.

There's generally about a three-week lag behind Covid-19 case trends and hospitalizations, according to a CNN Health analysis, but officials are hopeful the state will be in a more favorable position than last year.

"This is not March of 2020, we are not defenseless," Hochul said. "We have the tools to protect ourselves and the vulnerable loves ones in our families: Get vaccinated, get the booster and wear a mask when indoors or in large gatherings. Don't take a chance during the winter surge."

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu told CNN's "State of the Union" Sunday that the state has been preparing for a winter surge and hopes to combat Covid-19 spread with measures including state-issued at-home testing and flexing beds within hospitals. Bringing in health care workers from other states has been key as well, Sununu said.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan predicted that the state will see "probably the worst surge we've seen in our hospitals throughout the entire crisis" over the next three to five weeks, telling "Fox News Sunday" that officials are "trying to do everything we can to get the last 9.2% of our population vaccinated."

Lockdowns are not being considered, he said, and decried a return to remote learning in schools since protocols currently in place should be sufficient.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Pandemic mental toll on healthcare workers
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3284956/mental-health-toll-pandemic-health-care/
GIST	The COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely tough on health care workers across the United States, and it may cause some people to leave the field.

A study to assess the mental health effects of COVID-19 care among U.S. health care workers and first-responders showed that nearly half of all respondents, and 59% of all nurses, reported that their experiences had somewhat or significantly reduced their likelihood of remaining in their current field.

The [UW Medicine Newsroom shared the results](#) of this study, which is still ongoing. Psychiatry specialists at UW Medicine and the VA Puget Sound Healthcare System in Seattle, as well as emergency medicine physicians at Columbia University, collaborated on the research.

Early results, which represent 510 respondents, were [published Dec. 16](#) in the Journal of General Internal Medicine.

“It’s really important to remember that healthcare workers and first-responders may be professionals who are ‘trained’ to deal with trauma, but we are still human beings who are affected by what we experience,” said Dr. Rebecca Hendrickson, lead author and acting assistant professor with the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the UW School of Medicine and a clinician at the VA Puget Sound Healthcare System, in a written statement.

Between pandemic burnout and leaving to become traveling nurses, health workers in Washington state — and across the country — have been [exiting hospitals in droves](#).

“For almost two years, nurses and health care workers have worked longer and longer hours and put their lives at risk to help us,” said David Keepnews, a registered nurse and director of the Washington State Nurses Association.

To get [help from legislators to address hospital staffing shortages](#) in Washington, health workers across the state are launching the WA Safe + Healthy Campaign.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Cutting underwater noise in Puget Sound
SOURCE	https://crosscut.com/environment/2021/12/washington-launches-program-cut-underwater-noise-puget-sound
GIST	<p>In many places around the world, the start of the coronavirus pandemic dampened the usual cacophony of human noise in marine waters. From cargo ships and ferries to cruise ships and recreational boats, vessel traffic dropped. The ocean became quieter, and marine life responded, their clicks, whistles, and calls suddenly traveling farther.</p> <p>Rachel Aronson wants to keep up that slowdown in noise pollution from large commercial vessels in Washington waters, where the beloved, and endangered, southern resident orcas have long been struggling to hear and be heard.</p> <p>“For whales, it was probably a nice sound vacation, and we can build on that into a system that is sustainable for both humans and for whales,” she said.</p> <p>To protect endangered orcas in Washington state waters, a new collaborative program called Quiet Sound is preparing to launch several voluntary initiatives in the new year that are aimed at cutting underwater noise from large ships. Aronson directs Quiet Sound via the nonprofit Washington Maritime Blue, and she said the new measures range from piloting a potential seasonal slowdown zone for commercial vessels to using app-based technology to notify ship operators of nearby orca sightings in real time.</p> <p>Today, Quiet Sound is just starting to come into focus. Its organizers thus far have concentrated on finding funding, hashing out the program’s direction and basic operations, and adding partners among government agencies, tribes, the maritime industry, and nonprofits. Now with more than \$800,000 in funding for the next couple years, including from the state Legislature, the program hopes to turn down the volume on cargo ships, ferries, tugboats, fish processors and oil tankers in greater Puget Sound.</p>

Quiet Sound's origins can be traced to the Southern Resident Orca Task Force, formed in 2018 by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee. The next year, the task force released [final recommendations](#) for reversing the decline of these struggling marine mammals, and included some recommendations focused on reducing vessel noise.

Vessels, both their presence and the underwater noise they generate, are among the top threats to the recovery of the southern resident orcas who frequent Puget Sound in the summer and fall each year. These echolocating marine mammals rely on sound to navigate, find food and communicate in a relatively dark seascape.

As more ships speed through the growing region's waters, however, [the added noise](#) drowns out the orcas' calls, increases their stress levels and limits their ability to seek out their preferred prey, endangered chinook salmon. Even the mere presence of vessels within 400 yards can disrupt the southern residents, especially females, as they hunt for scarce fish, [research led by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows](#).

Like an underwater sprinter, adult orcas burn a lot of energy chasing chinook salmon, one fish at a time, and with less food to go around, adults struggle to catch enough to feed themselves, much less find the energy to reproduce and feed their hungry calves. A noisier ocean makes all of this more challenging.

That's where Quiet Sound hopes to make a difference in the wake of the orca task force's 2019 recommendations.

According to Jon Sloan, interim director of the Port of Seattle's maritime environment and sustainability program, the port first had to take those recommendations and help rally a planning team that includes state, local and federal agencies, the Makah Tribe, the shipping industry and nonprofits like Maritime Blue. And then there was the fundraising. The ports of Seattle and Tacoma and their joint venture ponied up \$100,000 of seed money in their 2021 budgets to get Quiet Sound started.

With those pieces finally coming together, Quiet Sound is eager to start having an impact on noise levels in Puget Sound. Aronson pointed out that slowing down large ships by just a moderate amount translates to even greater reductions in the underwater noise generated by ship propellers and engines, while having only a minimal impact on vessel travel times.

Quiet Sound is modeled on the similarly coalition-focused [Enhancing Cetacean Habitat and Observation program](#), which Canada's biggest port, the Port of Vancouver, started in 2014 to bring together diverse groups to cut noise pollution from large vessels coming into the bustling international port. While its early efforts concentrated on answering basic research questions about, for instance, vessel noise sources and levels, in recent years ECHO has been testing real-world measures to reduce noise impacts from large vessels traveling to and from the port, targeting times and places the southern residents are mostly likely to overlap with ship traffic, according to ECHO program manager Orla Robinson.

One measure suggests that ships slow down in specified zones in Haro Strait and Boundary Pass, which border the San Juan Islands, from June to roughly October, when the orcas tend to follow salmon into this region. Another ECHO initiative asks tugboats to shift their paths away from a critical orca feeding area along the southern coast of Vancouver Island in the Strait of Juan de Fuca, a measure that [led to a 60% to 80% drop](#) in sound intensity in 2020.

Although ECHO is a voluntary program, participation from the shipping industry remains extremely high, around 80% to 90% for ships going into and out of the Port of Vancouver. And Robinson said the program also can point to measurable drops in vessel noise, thanks to a network of underwater microphones, or hydrophones. [Independent research funded by the ECHO program](#) suggests that such efforts to quiet the waters of places like Haro Strait could pay off, increasing the likelihood that the southern residents will return to hunt there.

ECHO's results in British Columbia show promise that the Quiet Sound program could also help address existing vessel traffic noise in Washington waters, said Lovel Pratt, marine protection and policy director at nonprofit Friends of the San Juans.

"Hopefully, the Quiet Sound program will have similar success in terms of participation from the shippers and documented reductions in noise," she said. Pratt added, however, that such programs aren't perfect solutions, [given the major projected increases](#) in ship traffic in the Salish Sea, in part due to proposals to build or expand fossil fuel projects and shipping terminals.

Aronson, who has been in the job only a few months, is also encouraged by the early successes of ECHO, as well as the Canadian program's support for Quiet Sound's own burgeoning efforts.

While the new program is still trying to bring additional partners on board, Quiet Sound plans to make its public debut in January. That's also when the organization's leaders are set to begin convening working groups to pursue a pilot slowdown area in Washington waters, among other initiatives.

"The dream is: know where the whales are concentrating their activity and where that overlaps with high ship activity; [and then] put the slowdown recommendation into place [when] seasonally appropriate," said Aronson.

Quiet Sound also plans to tap into ECHO's [WhaleReport Alert System](#), a two-way platform run by the Canadian conservation nonprofit Ocean Wise to flag real-time orca sightings for mariners and port personnel.

The idea is that ships can then curb their speeds, post an additional whale spotter or move away from marine mammals in the area if it's safe to do so. On top of reducing noise pollution, such measures could also lead to fewer ships striking whales. Washington State Ferries, a major source of underwater noise, [have already started](#) using the WhaleReport Alert System after a ship collided with and killed an orca in 2016.

However, the alert system has several limitations, which Quiet Sound acknowledges. For example, it currently can receive whale sighting observations only through the Whale Report app and makes them available only to a private group of users. This setup leaves out an existing array of robust sources that report where orcas have been in Washington waters — data currently available to the public, who are often the ones generating it.

In addition, the alert system has relatively little data on whale sightings south of the Canadian border, something that Aronson and Quiet Sound hope to remedy in the days ahead.

"We'd like to work with some of our friends out there who have good whale data and help them connect their whale data to the WhaleReport Alert System," said Aronson.

Critics say Quiet Sound has plenty of potential allies in the Pacific Northwest's long-established whale observation community, but maintains that the program's early rollout has already managed to alienate some of them.

Quiet Sound will have to overcome certain tensions within the passionate community of people who have long been working on many of these issues in Washington, according to Fred Felleman, a whale biologist and environmental consultant with expertise in commercial shipping safety. Felleman also happens to be the Port of Seattle's commission president and a board member of Maritime Blue, but is not speaking in either capacity here.

"While I'm very supportive of the program's goals, I do have some serious concerns about its current implementation," Felleman wrote via email.

As a close observer not permitted to participate directly in rolling out Quiet Sound, Felleman said his concerns began as the not-yet-formed organization was assembling its early partners and developing its direction.

In Felleman's personal opinion, early planners have neglected the well-established orca-sighting and scientific communities — the type of people with “experience on the water with the whales.” That includes the whale-watching industry, which has its own industry-specific reporting app for sightings, and groups like the nonprofit [Orca Network](#), which has been running a community science network of whale observers in Washington on a shoestring budget for 20 years.

“That's the part I just think is an unforced error. And it creates alienation amongst the very folks that should be your closest friend,” said Felleman.

Susan Berta, co-founder and executive director of Orca Network, confirmed via email that her group feels left in the dark when it comes to Quiet Sound and its goals, though she saw promise for working together under the right conditions. Berta worries that the program's focus on the WhaleReport Alert System and its own app in particular could potentially undermine the region's existing whale reporting infrastructure, like that supported by her own scrappy nonprofit.

For years, Orca Network has been compiling the public's whale sightings in Puget Sound via a hotline, email, and social media (and is supporting the imminent local expansion of a [U.S.-based app](#)). That data is, in turn, used by researchers and natural resource managers, said Berta, and the group does all of this with very little financial support. For instance, the nonprofit receives \$15,000 a year from the federal government to turn its orca observations into an annual report.

If the public started funneling its local orca sightings instead to WhaleReport Alert System via the Whale Report app, Berta fears such competition might divert their members away from Orca Network and “result in loss of data for us, researchers and state and federal agencies who rely on it.”

“We have been asking and hoping for some support of the local [Washington]-based networks who have worked hard to build up our whale sightings and hydrophone networks over the last two decades,” she wrote of Quiet Sound, “but so far there are meetings and more meetings, then silence with no communication while they continue communicating with, working with, and funding Canadian efforts, which is disheartening for us.”

Aronson is aware of such concerns and hopes Quiet Sound can find an acceptable way to link other sources of data like Orca Network's into the WhaleReport Alert System and connect real-time whale sightings directly to mariners, who right now don't have easy access to them as they steer ships through Washington waters.

“One challenge is just finding the space that we can move things forward without re-creating the work that someone else has already done,” she said.

And while she acknowledges that Quiet Sound may have been a “black box” so far, Aronson is excited to open up the organization with many more opportunities for public engagement and outreach starting in January.

That sentiment is shared by the Port of Seattle's Sloan, who also points to January when Quiet Sound will start reaching out to organizations the group has “unofficially slated” to participate in working groups that would kick off the program's various initiatives. He said, “I know there's some anxiety out there. 'Well, how come we haven't been invited into Quiet Sound yet?' Well, the working groups haven't been formed yet. So that's when that will happen.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 US: Iran nuclear breakout time ‘really short’
SOURCE	https://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20211217-u-s-irans-nuclear-breakout-time-really-short

An unnamed source within the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden has said that the amount of time required for Iran to develop nuclear weapons if it chooses to do so is “really short,” adding that the situation was “alarming.”

The comments came as the latest round of talks with Iran aimed at salvaging a landmark 2015 nuclear deal was adjourned on December 17 amid questions raised by the UN’s nuclear watchdog about the disappearance of surveillance camera recordings from an Iranian nuclear complex.

The Biden administration official did not offer an estimate of Iran’s so-called “breakout time” — the amount of time it would take Tehran to develop a nuclear weapon if it renounced all international agreements restricting its nuclear program — but it has previously been estimated at several months. The official said Iran’s breakout time was “unacceptably short.”

U.S. national-security adviser Jake Sullivan said in Washington that the United States had conveyed to Iran its “alarm” over the purported progress of Iran’s nuclear program. He added that the Vienna talks are “not going well.”

European Union envoy Enrique Mora, the coordinator of the talks in the Austrian capital, said time to reach an agreement was running out fast.

“We don’t have months, we rather have weeks to have an agreement,” Mora told a news conference at the end of the seventh round of talks.

“There is a sense of urgency that is absolutely important if we want to really have success in these negotiations,” he added.

In 2018, then-President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the deal meant to curb Iran’s nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, prompting Tehran to gradually exceed limits imposed under the pact.

Biden, has said he is willing to rejoin the deal if Iran returns to full compliance, but negotiations between Tehran and world powers that started in April in Vienna were put on hold in June after the Islamic republic elected hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as president. They resumed after a five-month hiatus, with the United States participating indirectly. The other participants in the talks are Britain, France, Germany, China, and Russia.

Iran has gradually stepped up its conditions to rejoin the pact, demanding the lifting of all U.S. sanctions first.

Adding to the tensions, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Rafael Grossi said on December 17 that no understanding had been reached with Iran over the issue of a missing data-storage unit from one of the cameras at the centrifuge-parts-production site in Karaj, west of Tehran.

The IAEA and Iran had reached an agreement the previous day on replacing the cameras after Iran claimed they were damaged in a June attack it blames on Israel.

Asked at a news conference in Vienna whether he thought the data could have been destroyed in the June attack, Grossi replied: “We have doubts about that.”

“This is why we are asking them ‘Where is it?’ I’m hopeful that they are going to come up with an answer because it is very strange that it disappears,” Grossi said.

Participants said they aim to resume the talks in Vienna quickly, though they haven’t yet announced a firm date. Mora said, “I hope it will be during 2021,” while China’s chief negotiator, Wan Qun, said the talks will “resume hopefully before the end of the year.”

HEADLINE	12/18 TSA predicts busiest holiday travel days
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/transportation/holiday-travel-tsa-predicts-busiest-days-and-offers-seasonal-travel-tips/
GIST	<p>The American Automobile Association (AAA) says more than 109 million people — an almost 34% increase from 2020 — will travel 50 miles or more as they hit the road, board airplanes or take other transportation out of town between Dec. 23 and Jan. 2. AAA predicts that airlines will see a huge 184% increase from last year, as those who put off travels last December make the journey to reconnect with friends and family.</p> <p>TSA screened just under 21 million travelers during the 10-day Thanksgiving holiday, with the Sunday after Thanksgiving resulting in the highest traveler numbers this year. As Christmas and New Year celebrations beckon, the agency says travelers should expect high passenger volume from Friday, December 17 through Monday, January 3, with the busiest days being Thursday, December 23 and Monday January 3. It is difficult to predict how much of an impact the Omicron variant will have on travel, but an uptick in passenger numbers will be seen nevertheless.</p> <p>In order to help travel flow smoothly and safely this holiday season, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is reminding passengers to be prepared and take proactive action to avoid delays at the checkpoint.</p> <p>As well as joining the expedited trusted traveler program, PreCheck, passengers can help by arriving early at the checkpoint – TSA recommends two hours before a domestic flight and three hours before an international flight – or by being flexible with their flight bookings and avoiding the busiest periods at airports, which are usually 5am-7am and 4pm-6pm.</p> <p>Travelers can also help by packing smart. This means checking you don't have a firearm in your bag when you load it up with festive sweaters and gifts for friends and family, and also being aware that TSA officers may need to unwrap gifts to check the contents. To avoid your expertly curled ribbons being spoiled, and to allow TSA officers access to the items you carry, gift bags and boxes rather than gift wrap are recommended. Also remember the liquid rule. Containers larger than 100ml, regardless of the amount inside, must go in your checked baggage.</p> <p>Foods may be transported on flights. Solid food items like fruitcake, candy canes and chocolates are solid and may be transported in a carry-on bag. However, liquids and spreadable foods such as egg nog, wine, champagne, maple syrup and preserves are not solid and should be packed in checked bags.</p> <p>Visit TSA's useful What Can I Bring page before you leave you home if there is something you are not sure about. Travelers can also ask TSA a question on Twitter or Facebook Messenger at @AskTSA.</p> <p>Finally, travelers, TSA personnel and other individuals who work in the airports are required to continue to wear a mask as prescribed by the federal mask mandate when they are in airports, bus and rail stations, as well as while on passenger aircraft, public transportation, passenger railroads, and over-the-road buses operating on scheduled fixed-routes. This means that all travelers must be wearing a mask at TSA airport screening checkpoints and throughout the airport and during their flights. If you forget your mask, a TSA officer will offer one at the checkpoint.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Amid surge, on edge about traveling
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/us/covid-cases-holiday-plans-omicron.html
GIST	<p>Across the nation, Covid-19 cases are surging and the Omicron variant is spreading, throwing the scheduling of schools, concerts and sports leagues into question. Just days away from a holiday weekend, Americans are also grappling with whether to change their traveling or gathering plans.</p> <p>Millions are forging ahead, but, for many, a sense of unease has crept in.</p>

“My entire family is pretty uncertain about what to do there, what the rules should be,” Max Farmer, 24, who lives in San Francisco, said. “With Omicron, there’s just a lot of uncertainty.”

Mr. Farmer has plans to go to Minnesota this month and see his family for the first time in three years. But he said he was worried about the possibility of getting them sick, particularly a sister who was pregnant.

“It’s definitely something that goes through your head while you’re traveling,” he said.

More than 109 million Americans are expected to travel between Dec. 23 and Jan. 2, a 34 percent increase from last year, according to AAA. The number of airline passengers alone is projected to rise 184 percent from last year.

On Sunday, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease expert, said that it was OK for Americans to travel and gather, but he strongly emphasized that people take precautions.

“If you’re vaccinated and you’re boosted, and you take care when you go into congregate settings like airports to make sure you continually wear your mask, you should be OK,” Dr. Fauci said on “Meet the Press” on NBC. He urged air travelers to remain masked during flights.

Caiden Nason, a political campaigner in San Francisco, said he would be flying to see family in rural Southern California. “I’m a little nervous,” he said. But he added: “I just got tested today. My parents will all get tested, too. I will double mask on the airplane.”

Sally Avery, a native of Columbus, Ohio, who now lives in France, was in Cleveland to visit her daughter. She said the uncertainty over the Covid surge caused her to leave early and miss the holidays with her daughter. If France went into lockdown, she said at Hopkins International Airport in Cleveland, “I could be here for a long time, and I can’t do that.”

Monica Neal of Smyrna, Ga., took a trip to South Africa on Thanksgiving, but she said she ended up getting stuck there for days because of the Omicron variant. She canceled a trip to Europe this month.

“I have traveled internationally twice this year, and I’ve fortunately been very safe and very healthy,” she said. “I didn’t want to push that luck.”

Many others said they had no plans to adjust. Blake Howe, a software engineer in Roswell, Ga., said he was going on a cruise in January for his 30th birthday. He planned the trip months ago and received his shots and the booster.

Mr. Howe said he knew that cruise liners had been breeding grounds for Covid-19 in the past, but he’s not concerned this time. “They’re requiring full vaccination, as well as the booster,” he said, adding that “they’re at reduced capacity on the ship.”

Some who were interviewed weren’t planning to travel anywhere — and were happy to stay put.

“I wouldn’t want to go anywhere right now,” said Monica Rokes, a 69-year-old retired bank teller in Camden, Maine, who was shopping in the town of Rockland. She said she had started taking more precautions in recent days — washing her hands more often, using hand sanitizer, avoiding large crowds and groups of people, and wearing her mask.

“It’s very frightening,” she said of the recent surge. “I’m doing everything I can do to stay safe.”

For those planning to attend large gatherings, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is still recommending that everyone get vaccinated before getting together with multiple generations of the same family. For indoor gatherings, the C.D.C. is asking people to consider taking an at-home rapid test beforehand.

Eugene DeMarco, 35, who has a bakery stand at the West Side Market in Cleveland, said that his family typically had a big holiday get-together and that this year would be no different.

“We aren’t concerned at all,” said Mr. DeMarco, who is unvaccinated and was not wearing a mask. “About 60 or so of our family will be getting together. The Covid-19 infections are the reality, and you have to get used to it. Can’t be driven by fear.”

J’Ryce Johnson, a 20-year-old in Baltimore who works for a T-shirt company, said that he didn’t have extensive plans but that nothing was changing for him, either, adding that he was unconcerned by the virus.

“I don’t take vaccines at all,” he said, citing his spiritual belief that God heals. “That’s basically what it comes down to for me.”

In Springfield, Mo., Mary Ann Johnson, 57, is looking forward to celebrating with her family on Christmas Eve, even though she’s aware that the Omicron variant is spreading quickly.

She worries about contracting the virus from the general public or from clients at her workplace; she works with individuals who have been arrested in connection with impaired driving. But she said she felt comfortable with just her family: “all three of my kids, all five of the grandsons and two foster grandsons.”

Still, Ms. Johnson is making one adjustment: No hugs or kisses, she said.

“My daughter-in-law has lupus, so we are extremely cautious with her,” Ms. Johnson said. She added: “We all know how we feel. With the virus, that’s good enough.”

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HEADLINE	12/19 Ireland imposes hospitality curfew
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/19/world/covid-omicron-vaccine-boosters?type=style-live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#irelands-restaurants-and-bars-must-close-early-amid-rising-virus-cases
GIST	<p>Bars and restaurants in Ireland will be required to close early in the week leading up to Christmas, usually their busiest time of the year, as governments around Europe battle a new wave of Covid infections driven by the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Restaurants, bars and public venues must reduce their hours and close at 8 p.m., beginning on Monday. Prime Minister Micheál Martin said that cases of the Omicron variant in Ireland were doubling every few days and that, for Ireland, the worst of the pandemic could be ahead.</p> <p>“I’m apprehensive in terms of what this might mean in terms of the sheer scale of infection,” Mr. Martin told RTE, Ireland’s state broadcaster. “Which is why we can’t take risks — the great unknown being, how severe is this in terms of requiring hospitalizations and ICUs, and just damaging people in terms of health?”</p> <p>On Saturday, health authorities announced 7,333 new cases — double the number of new cases the day before. Health authorities said that 35 percent of positive swab tests taken last Wednesday indicated the Omicron variant, suggesting that it would become the dominant variant in Ireland “within days.”</p> <p>The new restrictions have been sharply criticized by trade bodies for bar owners and restaurateurs, and also by some lawmakers representing parties in Mr. Martin’s coalition government.</p> <p>The Licensed Vintners Association, representing bar operators in the Dublin area, said that many of its members, already weakened by previous lockdowns, saw the new measures as “closure by camouflage.”</p>

The Restaurants Association of Ireland called for the reintroduction of emergency payments to businesses that were forced to close completely in previous lockdowns. The government said it is considering such measures this week.

For Mr. Martin and his deputy prime minister, Leo Varadkar, the difficult choice between business needs and public health echoes their painful experience this time last year, when they gave in to calls to ease tight restrictions on socializing and entertainment so that Ireland could enjoy a “meaningful Christmas.”

Emergency restrictions were reintroduced on Christmas Eve last year, followed by a January lockdown, which further damaged the retail economy.

Jane Suiter, a politics and communications professor at Dublin City University, said that government policy is to contain overall levels of infection while keeping schools open. Ireland’s entertainment businesses, famously convivial at this time of year, seem to be an “easy target.”

“It’s hardest on people aged 18 to 30, who’ve already given so much,” she said. “My life isn’t really impacted at all, but my students’ lives are very deeply impacted.”

In neighboring [Britain](#), the government is leaving open the possibility of soon imposing another round of restrictions, the country’s health secretary said on Sunday.

Scientific advisers have warned lawmakers that more action is needed, because the country’s surge is threatening to overwhelm its health system, even after the government announced a [long-resisted coronavirus contingency plan](#) earlier this month, urging people to work from home if possible and extending a face-mask mandate.

Over the weekend, [Sadiq Khan, London’s mayor, declared a “major incident” — an emergency status that frees up resources — in the capital](#), and speculation on the possibility of a short-term nationwide lockdown has been swirling.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Governors reject lockdowns, restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/19/world/covid-omicron-vaccine-boosters?type=style&live-updates&label=coronavirus%20updates&index=0#governors-lockdowns-omicron
GIST	<p>As Omicron cases began to surge in several U.S. states, state leaders were calculating their approaches for a fatigued public.</p> <p>Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland, whose state is facing a surge that has led him to expand hospital capacity and limit elective surgeries, won’t enforce any lockdowns or mandates. Mr. Hogan, a Republican, said on the program “Fox News Sunday” that the state is “trying to do everything we can” to get the remainder of its state vaccinated — except for more mandates. “We are not anticipating any lockdowns at all,” he said. “We are not considering them.”</p> <p>But the state’s uptick is troubling, Mr. Hogan said: “I would say, in the next couple of days, Omicron is going to be the dominant variant in our state.”</p> <p>“We are anticipating, over the next three to five weeks, probably the worst surge we’ve seen in our hospitals throughout the entire crisis,” he added.</p> <p>Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey is also battling spiking coronavirus cases and overwhelmed hospitals, still from the Delta variant.</p> <p>“Every time you think you got it figured out, it takes a turn you don’t expect,” Mr. Murphy said on the program “Fox News Sunday.” He added, “This is unrelenting. There’s an enormous amount of fatigue out there, as it relates to this virus.”</p>

And while a lockdown isn't likely, it hasn't been completely ruled out, he said. "You have to leave it on the table, but I don't see it," he said, citing the state's highly vaccinated population, including residents who have gotten a booster shot. "As fatigued as they are, they are largely accepting of what you need to do to push back at this — and for the time being, at least, we think that's going to work for us."

At least [70 percent of New Jersey residents](#) are fully vaccinated, according to a Times database, putting it in the top states for inoculations. Cases have been doubling in recent weeks, with New Jersey reporting a rolling seven-day average of about 5,500 daily cases. Mr. Murphy [did not follow](#) New York's governor, Kathy Hochul, in implementing a recent mask mandate. But he said it would remain an option.

Gov. Jared Polis of Colorado on Sunday voiced cautious optimism about his state's coronavirus numbers, citing a free at-home testing program and vaccinations.

Colorado's numbers have fallen since November. Mr. Polis maintained that he would not impose a mask mandate, something he has said should be up to local officials.

"We have a lot less hospitalizations than we did a few weeks ago," Mr. Polis said on the NBC program "Meet the Press."

He cited pandemic fatigue as a reason to avoid more restrictive measures for now and said that vaccinations would be enough to keep the variant at bay. "People just don't react well to this ongoing environment of fear for two years," Mr. Polis said. He added, "Getting three doses of the vaccine is highly effective and all but negates any risk that you face."

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HEADLINE	12/19 Chile elects its' youngest president
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/world/americas/chile-president-election.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>SANTIAGO, Chile — Chileans on Sunday elected Gabriel Boric as their next president, entrusting the young leftist lawmaker with helping to shape the future of a nation that has been roiled by protests and is now drafting a new Constitution.</p> <p>At 35, Mr. Boric will be the nation's youngest leader and by far its most liberal since President Salvador Allende, who died by suicide during the 1973 military coup that ushered in a brutal 17-year dictatorship.</p> <p>He will assume office at the final stage of a yearslong initiative to draft a new Constitution, an effort that is likely to bring about profound legal and political changes on issues including gender equality, Indigenous rights and environmental protections.</p> <p>Capitalizing on widespread discontent with the political factions that have traded power in recent decades, Mr. Boric attracted voters by pledging to reduce inequality and promising to raise taxes on the rich to fund a substantial expansion of the social safety net, more generous pensions and a greener economy.</p> <p>The president-elect defeated José Antonio Kast, a far-right former lawmaker who sought to portray Mr. Boric as a radical communist who would destroy one of the region's most solid economies. Mr. Boric's coalition includes the Communist Party.</p> <p>Mr. Kast conceded the race, saying he had called Mr. Boric to congratulate him.</p> <p>"From now on, he is the president elect of Chile and deserves all our respect and constructive collaboration," Mr. Kast wrote on Twitter.</p>

With more than 98 percent of ballots counted, Mr. Boric had won more than 55 percent of the vote and Mr. Kast had 44 percent. The margin surprised political observers because recent polls suggested the race was tighter.

“I am going to give the best of me to rise to this tremendous challenge,” Mr. Boric said during a televised video call from the outgoing president, Sebastián Piñera, which continued a tradition in Chilean politics.

Mr. Boric also said that he hoped to unite the nation after a hard-fought race. “I will be the president of all Chileans.”

Mr. Piñera said he was pleased “democracy worked, and you were a part of that.”

Jubilant Boric supporters took to the streets Sunday night in several Chileans cities. Many waved the national flag and chanted campaign slogans as champagne bottles were passed around.

Addressing supporters from a stage in a packed plaza in Santiago late Sunday night, Mr. Boric said he intended to unite the nation and set in motion structural changes to make Chile more egalitarian. “Today hope trumped fear,” he said.

The race was the most polarizing and acrimonious in recent history, presenting Chileans with starkly different visions on issues including the role of the state in the economy, the rights of historically marginalized groups and public safety.

And the stakes were higher than in other presidential contests: The incoming president stands to profoundly shape the effort to replace Chile’s Constitution, imposed in 1980 when the country was under military rule. Chileans [voted overwhelmingly last year](#) to draft a new one.

Mr. Boric, leader of the leftist coalition Frente Amplio, has been a staunch supporter of the push to update the charter, which was set in motion by a wave of protests in late 2019 over inequality, the cost of living and Chile’s free market economy.

In contrast, Mr. Kast [campaigned vigorously against](#) establishing a constitutional convention, whose members Chileans elected in May. The body is drafting a new charter that voters will approve or reject in a direct vote next September.

Members of the convention saw Mr. Kast’s rise as an existential threat to their work, fearing he could marshal the resources and the bully pulpit of the presidency to persuade voters to reject a revised Constitution.

“There’s so much at stake,” said Patricia Politzer, a member of the convention from Santiago. “The president has enormous power and he could use the full backing of the state to campaign against the new Constitution.”

Mr. Kast and Mr. Boric clashed forcefully during the final days of the race, each presenting the prospect of his loss as a catastrophe for the South American nation of 19 million people.

Mr. Boric [referred to his rival as a fascist](#) and assailed several of his plans, which included expanding the prison system and empowering the security forces to more forcefully crack down on Indigenous challenges to land rights in the south of the country.

Mr. Kast told voters a Boric presidency would destroy the foundations of Chile’s economy and would likely put the nation on a path toward becoming a failed state like Venezuela.

“This has been a campaign dominated by fear, to a degree we’ve never seen before,” said Claudia Heiss, a political science professor at the University of Chile. “That can do damage in the long run because it deteriorates the political climate.”

Mr. Boric and Mr. Kast each found traction with voters who had become fed up with the center-left and center-right political factions that have traded power in Chile in recent decades. The conservative incumbent, Mr. Piñera, saw his approval ratings plummet below 20 percent over the past two years.

Mr. Boric got his start in politics as a prominent organizer of the large student demonstrations in 2011 that persuaded the government to grant low-income students tuition-free education. He was first elected to congress in 2014.

A native of Punta Arenas, Chile's southernmost province, Mr. Boric promised to take bold steps to curb global warming, including a politically risky proposal to raise taxes on fuel.

Mr. Boric, who has tattoos and dislikes wearing ties, is a departure from the mold of traditional presidential candidates. He has also spoken publicly about his diagnosis of obsessive compulsive disorder, a condition for which he was briefly hospitalized in 2018.

In the wake of the sometimes violent street protests and political turmoil set off by an increase in subway fares in October 2019, he vowed to turn a litany of grievances that had been building over generations into an overhaul of public policy. Mr. Boric said it was necessary to raise taxes on corporations and the ultrarich to expand the social safety net and create a more egalitarian society.

"Today, many older people are working themselves to death after backbreaking labor all their lives," he said during the race's final debate, promising to create a system of more generous pensions. "That is unfair."

Mr. Kast, the son of German immigrants, served as a federal lawmaker from 2002 to 2018. A father of nine, he has been a vocal opponent of abortion and same-sex marriage. His national profile rose during the 2017 presidential race, when he won nearly 8 percent of the vote.

Mr. Kast called his rival's proposed expansion of spending reckless, saying what Chile needed was a leaner, more efficient state. He also warned that electing Mr. Boric would deepen unrest and stoke violence.

Mr. Kast invoked the "poverty that has dragged down Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba" as a cautionary tale. "People flee from there because dictatorship, narco-dictatorship, only brings poverty and misery," he said.

Antonia Vera, a recent high school graduate who campaigned for Mr. Boric, said she saw his election as the only means to turn a grass-roots movement for a fairer, more prosperous nation into reality.

"When he speaks about hope, he's speaking about the long-term future, a movement that started brewing many years ago and exploded in 2019," she said.

But the new president will struggle to carry out sweeping changes, said Claudio Fuentes, a political science professor at Diego Portales University in Santiago, noting the evenly divided incoming congress.

"It's a scenario in which it will be hard to push reforms through," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/20 China tennis player reverses her assertion
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/world/asia/china-tennis-peng-shuai.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	Peng Shuai, the Chinese tennis star whose account of sexual coercion by a former Communist Party leader ignited weeks of tensions and galvanized calls for boycotts of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, has reversed her assertion that she had been sexually assaulted by the official.

Ms. Peng made the comments in an interview that was published on Sunday by a Singaporean newspaper. But the retraction appeared unlikely to extinguish concerns about her well-being and suspicions that she had been the target of well-honed pressure techniques and a [propaganda campaign](#) by Chinese officials.

The controversy erupted [last month](#) when Ms. Peng wrote in a post on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform, that she had maintained a yearslong, on-and-off relationship with Zhang Gaoli, now 75, a retired Chinese vice premier. She said that in an encounter with him about three years ago, she had “never consented” and that she was “crying all the time.”

She then abruptly dropped from public view, and [global concern for her whereabouts grew](#). In a written statement later, she appeared to seek to pull back the accusation, and the Women’s Tennis Association and other professional players rallied to her side, saying they believed that her statement had been written under official duress.

The tennis association [suspended playing matches in China](#) while seeking to establish independent contact with Ms. Peng. Last week, the leaders of the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee [criticized China’s handling of Ms. Peng’s case](#).

In the [interview with Lianhe Zaobao](#), a Chinese-language Singaporean newspaper, Ms. Peng, 35, said, “First, I want to stress a very important point — I never said or wrote that anyone sexually assaulted me.”

“There may have been misunderstandings by everyone,” she said of her initial post on Weibo.

Ms. Peng also denied that she had been under house arrest or that she had been forced to make any statements against her will.

“Why would someone keep watch over me?” she said. “I’ve been very free all along.”

Her denial drew skepticism from human rights advocates, who have said that Chinese officials appear to have corralled her into rehearsed video appearances.

Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, [said on Twitter](#) that Ms. Peng’s latest statement was “only deepening concerns about the pressure to which the Chinese government is subjecting her.”

Last month, video clips of her at a Beijing restaurant were posted on the Twitter account of the chief editor of The Global Times, an influential newspaper run by the Communist Party. The editor described them as showing Ms. Peng having dinner with her coach and friends. She also appeared in [live video calls](#) with the president of the International Olympic Committee [and other officials](#) with the organization.

The Chinese authorities are likely to seize on Ms. Peng’s latest statement, recorded on video, to push back against calls for a full investigation of her claims and to oppose the tennis association’s suspension of matches in China.

The minutes-long interview with Ms. Peng, which took place at a skiing competition in Shanghai, left many key questions unasked and unanswered.

She was not asked directly about her relationship with Mr. Zhang, who was a [member of the Politburo Standing Committee](#), the Communist Party’s highest body. Nor was she asked how her understanding of sexual assault squared with her earlier description of what had happened with Mr. Zhang.

Ms. Peng has been one of China’s highest-ranked tennis players, reaching No. 1 in doubles in 2014 and as high as 14th as a singles player. Her Weibo account in early November of her relationship with Mr. Zhang lasted for all of 20 minutes before Chinese censors erased it. But the news quickly spread online.

Since then, the Women's Tennis Association and other organizations have pressed the Chinese authorities to ensure Ms. Peng's safety and to give her a chance to recount freely what had happened with Mr. Zhang.

The interview published on Sunday came after the international arm of China's state broadcaster, China Global Television Network, publicized an English-language email in Ms. Peng's name in November. In it, she denies the sexual assault accusations and asks to be left alone.

But Steve Simon, chief executive of the Women's Tennis Association, and many rights activists [have raised doubts](#) about its authenticity.

After this latest interview, a spokesperson for the association said it still had not been able to make independent contact with Ms. Peng. And the association said in a statement, "We remain steadfast in our call for a full, fair and transparent investigation, without censorship, into her allegation of sexual assault, which is the issue that gave rise to our initial concern."

It added, "As we have consistently stated, these appearances do not alleviate or address the W.T.A.'s significant concerns about her well-being and ability to communicate without censorship or coercion."

In the interview, Ms. Peng said she had written a Chinese statement "entirely of my own free will," and then someone had helped her translate it into English.

There was no mention of Ms. Peng's latest comments in Chinese state media, which operates inside a wall of censorship.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Central banks worry: omicron inflation
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/central-banks-worry-omicron-could-sustain-inflation-11639909805?mod=hp_lead_pos7
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant is circling the globe, closing borders and sparking new restrictions on economic activity. Yet central banks, instead of loosening monetary policy to prop up their economies as they did at the start of the pandemic, are moving to unwind stimulus and raise interest rates.</p> <p>The moves reflect a new thinking among policy makers about the pandemic's economic effects: Central-bank officials worry that rather than simply threatening to curtail economic growth, a surge in Covid-19 cases could also prolong high inflation.</p> <p>In the past week, the Federal Reserve, the Bank of England and the European Central Bank all moved to tighten monetary policy in response to inflation concerns.</p> <p>When the pandemic first became widespread, in early 2020, governments locked down their economies. Consumer spending fell sharply, employers shed workers and prices fell. Within a few months, the rise of e-commerce and remote working allowed the economy in many developed countries to recover rapidly. With mass vaccinations, that recovery has continued this year.</p> <p>Now, new case surges are having much less severe impacts on spending and job creation. Instead, they are threatening to prolong supply-chain disruptions and keep inflation elevated.</p> <p>"What we saw in the early stages of the pandemic is that demand initially dropped a lot more than supply so it ended up being deflationary, particularly because of pretty stringent lockdowns," said Paul Ashworth, chief North America economist at Capital Economics.</p> <p>Today, with governments reluctant to impose new lockdowns, it is the other way around, he said. "Supply could potentially be hit more than demand and therefore it becomes inflationary rather than deflationary this time," he said.</p>

Scientists are still studying [the effects of Omicron](#). So far, it appears to spread faster than earlier variants and is able to evade immunity from vaccines and past infection, but it might cause milder symptoms.

Speaking to reporters following the Dec. 14-15 meeting, Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said, “Wave upon wave, people are learning to live with this...The more people get vaccinated the less the economic effect.”

For instance, new daily cases peaked at more than 31,000 a day in the first two months of the pandemic last year. As states imposed stay-at-home orders, that led to a record 31.2% annualized decline in gross domestic product. By contrast, cases peaked at around 250,000 a day in the first quarter of 2021 but the economy grew 6.3%.

Governments have imposed fewer, and more targeted, restrictions with each wave. Moreover, many workers and businesses have adapted to outbreaks, such as reverting to remote work.

Nonetheless, economists and investors do expect Omicron to have some negative impact on growth, particularly with [international travel](#). In recent days several European countries have announced new restrictions on activity. Economists at Pantheon Macroeconomics brought down forecast U.S. growth to 3% annualized in the first quarter from 5%. They see most of that decline being made up in subsequent quarters.

Even as the virus’s impact on growth has eased, its impact on inflation pressure appears to have flipped, from downward to upward. Covid-19 prompted consumers to spend less on in-person services such as amusement parks and more on durable goods such as appliances and furniture. Closed factories and ports in China made it harder for imports to reach the U.S. And fear of getting sick kept people from leaving home, leading to a labor shortage and rising wages. About 3.2 million adults said in early September—when the Delta wave was at its height—that they weren’t working because they were afraid of getting sick, according to census data. That was up from 2.8 million before the wave.

Economists at Goldman Sachs on Friday raised their core-inflation forecast to 3.4% in June 2022 from 3.25% based on the prospect of Omicron-related factory shutdowns in Asia and higher housing inflation.

[Consumer prices in the U.S. rose 6.8% in November](#) over the previous year, the biggest jump in almost four decades. In response, Fed officials said they would likely end their bond-buying stimulus program in March of next year and [penciled in three quarter-percentage-point interest-rate increases](#) by the end of 2022.

Increasingly, Federal Reserve officials are worried the new Omicron variant could exert even more upward pressure on inflation.

On Friday, Fed governor Christopher Waller said, “We...do not know if Omicron will exacerbate labor and goods supply shortages and add inflation pressure.”

The shift in officials’ thinking has been under way for a few months. Mr. Powell [told Congress in November](#) that fears surrounding Omicron “could reduce people’s willingness to work in person, which would slow progress in the labor market and intensify supply-chain disruptions.”

If that is the case, it could push the Fed to raise rates faster than anticipated, said Robert Dent, senior U.S. economist at Nomura Securities, who expects four rate increases next year.

“They know now this is an inflationary phenomenon and inflation is already up pre-Omicron, so it reinforces this tendency to be hawkish,” he said.

In the U.K., where Omicron [has pushed new daily cases to record highs](#), the government of Prime Minister [Boris Johnson](#) has introduced rules that require proof of vaccination for entry to nightclubs and some other venues, although those restrictions are milder than those during some previous surges. But the Bank of England, responding to elevated inflation, [raised a key interest rate last week](#) for the first time since the onset of the pandemic.

“The experience since March 2020 suggests that successive waves of Covid appear to have had less impact on GDP, although there is uncertainty around the extent to which that will prove to be the case on this occasion,” policy makers said.

The Bank of England had previously assumed that receding Covid-19 infections would alleviate upward pressure on goods prices by rebalancing consumers’ spending toward services. With renewed social distancing, “this rebalancing was now more likely to be delayed and so global price pressures might persist for longer,” minutes to the bank’s meeting said. “China’s current [zero-Covid strategy](#) could lead to renewed disruptions at Chinese factories and ports, and could affect shipping costs,” the minutes added.

Against that, overall demand, in particular for services, could slow, the minutes said, leaving the net impact on inflation unclear.

The European Central Bank also believes that the new variant’s impact is likely to be much less severe than during the first wave. Thursday it announced the end of a program of bond purchases—the Pandemic Emergency Purchasing Program—that was intended to offset some of the negative economic consequences of Covid-19.

But ECB President Christine Lagarde told reporters after the meeting that she was closely watching how Omicron would affect supply.

“The balance between the inflationary or deflationary impact that Omicron will have is still totally uncertain,” she said.

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HEADLINE	12/19 For day laborers wages boom, jobs plentiful
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/for-day-laborers-wages-are-booming-and-jobs-are-plentiful-11639926006?mod=lead_feature_below_a_pos1
GIST	<p>POMONA, Calif.—Dozens of men used to line up every morning at a day-labor center in this city east of Los Angeles and stay there most of the day in hopes they would be one of the lucky few to get hired. Now, between 10 and 15 show up and most have a job by 9 a.m.</p> <p>“There is a lot of work and not a lot of workers,” said Javier Garcia, job-placement coordinator for the Pomona Economic Opportunity Center, which pairs potential employers with day laborers.</p> <p>Day laborers, typically men who migrated to the U.S. without legal authorization and are paid in cash for jobs that last a few hours to a few days, have long been among the most tenuously employed people in the U.S. Though there are no estimates about how many day laborers might be in the informal market, researchers suspect there are fewer today than in decades past, in part because some people have been able to move to more stable work situations.</p> <p>Due to a worker shortage in a growing economy, they are enjoying leverage they haven’t before known. Hourly wages of \$25 are common, workers in Pomona said, compared with about \$15 before the pandemic. And with opportunities plentiful for many day laborers, they are now choosier about what jobs they take.</p> <p>“The last year has been very good. I’m working three to four days in a row,” said Cristobal Gonzalez Camacho, a 58-year-old painter originally from Mexico who has been in the U.S. for about 25 years,</p>

before leaving the Pomona center for a job on a recent morning. “A year ago it was very slow, a day or so a week, but sometimes nothing.”

Many day laborers like Mr. Gonzalez are hired by construction sites that need more hands or by individuals or businesses for repair and improvement projects. Recently, however, many have been tapped to work at e-commerce warehouses overwhelmed by supply-chain backups and high demand before the holidays. Pomona is close to California’s largest concentration of such warehouses, which receive goods from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

“It’s a lot of moving boxes and unloading trucks,” said Mario de Leon Diaz, a 41-year-old from Mexico who said he has been in the U.S. about nine years.

The provisions of laws that allow for the hiring of day laborers vary widely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Generally, employers aren’t required to verify a day laborer’s immigration status, as they are for workers on the payroll. Like freelancers, day laborers are typically responsible for reporting their own incomes to federal and state authorities.

Some people and businesses that hire day laborers are reluctant to admit publicly that they hire people who might have entered the country illegally and pay them in cash, making it easy for them to not pay taxes.

Veronica Dubon, who runs a small alternative and holistic healing business out of her home in Pomona, said she routinely hires workers from the center for cleaning jobs, paying at least \$25 an hour. She said she tried hiring through apps for gig workers but found limited availability and prices of \$50 per hour or more—more than she can afford.

“It’s been a lifesaver for us,” Ms. Dubon said of the day-labor center. “I honestly don’t know if I’d be able to run my business otherwise.”

In addition to serving as safe and legal locations for workers to match with employers, day-labor centers have long offered social services such as food banks. This year, some have added free vaccines and Covid-19 tests.

People who work at day-labor centers say there are times when they can’t find enough people to fill the available jobs. That is in part, they said, because many people who did day labor in the past have been able to find steadier positions.

Ligia Guallpa, executive director of the Brooklyn day labor center Worker’s Justice Project, said some day laborers have become gig workers delivering food and other items, so they can set their own hours and work as often as they want.

Ms. Guallpa said, “They’ve gone from day laborers on the corner to day laborers in the apps.”

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HEADLINE	12/19 Shipping, logistic costs to keep rising 2022
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/shipping-and-logistics-costs-are-expected-to-keep-rising-in-2022-11639918804?mod=hp_minor_pos13
GIST	<p>Companies are bracing for more steep increases in shipping and logistics prices next year after supply-chain costs soared in the scramble to move goods during the Covid-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Transportation and logistics providers are seeking big boosts in prices for contracts for the coming year, signaling that the inflationary pressure driven by strong demand and tight capacity in freight markets is likely to persist.</p> <p>With high shipping demand still far outweighing tight capacity across the freight sector, industry experts say transport operators have leverage to raise prices when negotiating new contracts. Ocean-shipping</p>

executives say they expect the rates set in many annual contracts will double compared with agreements struck earlier this year, before supply-chain bottlenecks squeezed capacity. Some trucking companies project double-digit growth in contract rates for 2022.

Prices have been rising across the freight sector, including in parcel delivery, trucking, ocean shipping and warehousing. Most freight-transportation contracts are negotiated annually, although many large shippers may have multiyear agreements with a variety of carriers.

“I think folks are a little shell-shocked at the moment,” said Todd Bulmash, a logistics executive and board member at the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals. “They’re preparing for the worst.”

Pricing in most freight transport and logistics markets generally slides between largely stable long-term contract rates and spot-market pricing that is more sensitive to shifts in demand and the availability of capacity. Prices in spot markets for ocean shipping, trucking and other logistics services have escalated sharply this year.

Overall, domestic shipping rates for moving goods by road and rail in the U.S. are up about 23% this year from 2020, according to [Cass Information Systems](#) Inc., which handles freight payments for companies.

A separate measure in the Logistics Managers’ Index that tracks overall logistics prices, including transportation, warehousing and inventory prices, reached a record in November, up 3.4% from October and a 14% increase year-over-year. The index was launched in 2016.

Trucking companies and other logistics firms note their own higher costs, including rising salaries as they have sought workers in a [tight labor market](#).

“As long as we have underlying inflation across the economy, you’re going to see that inflation reflected in the cost of goods and services to include trucking,” said Derek Leathers, chief executive of Omaha, Neb.-based truckload carrier Werner Enterprises Inc.

Mr. Leathers, who said contract rates could rise by high single-digit to mid-double-digit percentages in 2022, expects price increases to moderate as transportation demand eases and companies finish replenishing depleted inventories. However, he said, “We don’t foresee that until 2023. All of 2022 we view as a capacity-constrained market with inflationary pressure and with significant equipment disruptions.”

The parcel-shipping prices that are closest to consumers are [rising at the fastest pace](#) in nearly a decade as pandemic-driven demand shifts pricing power to carriers that deliver packages to homes and businesses. Delivery giants [FedEx](#) Corp. and [United Parcel Service](#) Inc. both said rates would go up an average of 5.9% next year across most services, the first time in eight years that either company had annual increases above 4.9%.

Prices to ship sea containers are likely to reach records under annual contracts that are usually negotiated early in the year for the peak shipping season, according to Xeneta, a Norway-based transportation data and procurement specialist.

Xeneta said the spot price to ship a 40-foot container from Shanghai to Los Angeles earlier this month was 75% higher than the same time last year. Carriers “go into contract negotiations right now holding the lion’s share of the aces,” Peter Sand, Xeneta’s chief analyst.

Seko Logistics, an Itasca, Ill.-based freight forwarder, says its contracted rate to ship a 40-foot container from Asia to the U.S. West Coast could double next year to between \$6,500 and \$7,000. In 2019, the firm paid ocean carriers about \$1,500 for the same service.

“The carriers are fully in control and the rest of us are sitting on our hands waiting for the carriers to tell us what to do,” said Craig Grossgart, senior vice president of global ocean freight for Seko.

Gordon Downes, chief executive of New York Shipping Exchange Inc., which monitors and enforces ocean contracts, said talks between some carriers and customers have already started, rather than waiting until the new year, because shippers who waited to the last minute during the last negotiating period found carriers had already run out of space.

In trucking, the outlook for higher rates next year follows a sharp run-up in the contract prices that businesses negotiate with trucking companies and freight brokers. Last month the average contract rate reached a record \$2.51 per mile excluding fuel surcharge, according to online freight marketplace DAT Solutions LLC.

To avoid competing for scarce trucking capacity on the open market, some retailers and manufacturers are rolling over existing contracts with carriers for 2022 in exchange for moderate price increases, said Chris Caplice, chief scientist at DAT and executive director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Center for Transportation and Logistics. "If you go out to bid, you can expect your rates will be 10% to 15% higher, on average," Dr. Caplice said.

The cost of storing goods is also set to rise more quickly as warehouse labor costs are increasing and facility owners seek price increases to replace expiring leases that had allowed companies to sidestep sharply rising rents during 2021.

Prices to lease industrial properties have jumped 25% on average nationwide over rates tenants paid at the end of five-year leases that expired in the third quarter, real-estate firm CBRE Group Inc. said in early December.

Landlords are even reluctant to agree to new long-term leases that bake in the current market rates, reasoning that tight capacity will lead to rising prices in the coming years, said Carolyn Salzer, head of industrial and logistics research in the Americas at real-estate firm Cushman & Wakefield. "Five years down the road rents are going to be higher," she said. "So it's in the better interest of the investor owners to do a short-term lease right now."

Third-party logistics operators that provide outsourced distribution and fulfillment services are also passing higher labor costs on to their customers as competition for warehouse workers boosts wages.

Shippers are trying various ways to keep the transportation inflation at bay, such as consolidating more loads to minimize truck trips and renting truck trailers for storage rather than paying rising warehousing rents.

But experts say companies have little choice other than absorbing the cost or passing it along to their customers.

Overall, transportation rarely exceeds more than 7% of the cost of goods being shipped, said Satish Jindel, president of SJ Consulting Group Inc. For most companies, "the value of the product you're selling and the importance of that sale is much greater than a slight increase in transportation costs," Mr. Jindel said. "You don't want to say you lost a sale because you were trying to find a cheaper way of getting it there."

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HEADLINE	12/19 Dying man exposes gap WA police reform
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/times-watchdog/in-a-shopping-center-parking-lot-a-dying-man-exposes-a-gap-in-washingtons-police-reform/
GIST	<p>Eric Schirmer parked at a Rite Aid in Mill Creek and sat there month after month, willing himself to die.</p> <p>He was 68 years old, a French-born electrical-design engineer who had worked for Airbus and Boeing, a man whose good looks belied the alcohol that ravaged him on the inside. After a dispute with his wife,</p>

he'd moved out of the apartment they shared in late May and folded his 6-foot frame into his silver Dodge Charger.

He scrawled his predicament on a sheet of notebook paper and placed it on the dash. It read:
DEPRESSED (AND LOST)

His health deteriorated over the summer but he refused help. In early August, paramedics predicted Schirmer would “probably pass away within days unless he was seen by a doctor,” according to a police report. A mental health official determined that Schirmer should be involuntarily committed, said a person with direct knowledge of the situation, and signed a form directing police to transfer him to a hospital.

Had it been a few weeks earlier, police might well have removed Schirmer from his vehicle and done just that. But now officers had a new law to consider.

[House Bill 1310](#), which went into effect July 25, created a statewide standard for when law enforcement officers can use force. The legislative sponsors intended to curb excessive use of force by police, but it has sown confusion among departments about what level of force is permissible when responding to a crisis that isn't a crime.

Mental health officials often coordinate with police to evaluate whether someone needs to be involuntarily committed. Before late July, if the person was ordered detained and refused to go, police would physically subdue the person and take them to a hospital.

The new law requires officers to use the least amount of force necessary, but it doesn't define “force” or explicitly say how it should be used responding to a person in crisis. Some police departments have been unwilling to use any force to involuntarily detain a person who isn't committing a crime. Others, at least initially, [opted not to respond](#) to some mental health calls.

In the first two months since HB 1310 went into effect, evaluations for involuntary commitments declined sharply around the state, according to Washington state Health Care Authority [data](#). One type of commitment — when patients are temporarily held while waiting for a licensed psychiatric bed — declined 22% over the three months ending in September compared with a year earlier, to a level not seen since the spring of 2017.

HCA officials said it isn't yet clear if HB 1310 played a role, but they began collecting new data in October from counties across the state on law enforcement responses to mental health calls. That data, reviewed by The Times, shows there were at least 101 times in [October](#) and [November](#) when mental health officials requested help from police but officers declined to respond or transport a person who had been involuntarily committed.

Without law enforcement on hand, mental health workers might not be able to safely evaluate a person in crisis, according to county officials who supervise such work. If someone meets the criteria for involuntary detention but refuses to go, the officials might not be able to immediately get the person into treatment.

“Historically we've had excellent working relationships with law enforcement to help those individuals and get them into care, and then all of a sudden, we can't,” said Cammy Hart-Anderson, who manages a division of behavioral health for Snohomish County. “My heart goes out to individuals who are experiencing that behavioral health crisis and their families.”

In King County, with three dozen policing agencies making their own interpretations of the law, “the biggest impact is the variation in whether we're going to get a law enforcement response,” said Kelli Nomura, director of the county's Behavioral Health and Recovery Division. “That's been a challenge.”

Law enforcement officials say the law has taken a toll on officers who want to help people in crisis without running afoul of the new standards on using force.

In some cases, “We’re waiting for the situation to escalate to fit the definition of 1310,” said Brian Smith, the police chief in Port Angeles. Within a week of the law taking effect, Smith described responding with social workers and paramedics to a man wandering in a parking lot in an apparent crisis. Officers determined they couldn’t use force and left the scene.

They responded again after the man was accused of a misdemeanor assault, arrested him and turned him over to medical professionals, Smith said. “Luckily he didn’t hurt anybody.”

Question of force

House Bill 1310 was part of a [suite of policing reforms](#) signed into law this year, fueled by public protests over high-profile cases of officers killing people of color. The new laws also ban no-knock warrants, chokeholds and neck restraints, and make it easier to strip officers of their badge for misconduct.

The new standards of using force immediately raised questions. At the request of lawmakers, the state Attorney General’s Office [clarified](#) in August that it “does not prohibit peace officers from responding to community caretaking calls, including mental health calls,” though it has yet to issue a formal opinion.

“What has massively changed is what they can legally do when they are there,” Steve Strachan, executive director of the Washington Association of Sheriffs and Police Chiefs, said of mental health calls.

“Under the new law, there’s a real question as to whether a law enforcement officer can put a hand on their back, put a hand on their arm, assist them into an ambulance or onto a gurney,” he said.

The law says that law enforcement officers can only use force in certain scenarios: to make an arrest, for example, or to prevent people from killing or harming themselves or others when the threat is imminent. Before using force, the law instructs officers to exhaust all other options and to leave the area “if there is no threat of imminent harm and no crime has been committed, is being committed or is about to be committed.”

In the Seattle Police Department’s interpretation of the law, “force” means physical contact that is likely to cause pain or injury, according to a [November directive](#). “Officers may use reasonable, necessary, and proportional force” to detain someone “suffering from a behavioral health disorder who presents an imminent threat” of harm to themselves or others, the policy states.

Other departments have taken a different posture.

“As it relates to welfare checks and behavioral health calls, it would not be prudent to apply physical force to a person in need of services,” said Jeff Young, chief of the Mill Creek Police Department, expressing concern that officers could face liability.

“The headline test”

In the months before the law took effect, Eric Schirmer’s life had come apart. He was out of work and of ailing health, hastened by alcoholism and poor nutrition, according to his son, Julien Schirmer. Eric Schirmer and his wife quarreled over alcohol and finances, according to Julien, who lived with them, and his father moved into his car.

Marilyn Crosby noticed Schirmer parked at the Rite Aid, and the sign on his dashboard. She was a regular customer and also lived in her vehicle, though she did so out of preference for what she called “the van life,” a more minimalist lifestyle.

Schirmer didn’t look like other people Crosby had seen living homeless, she said. His fingernails were clean. He wore cologne. He reminded her of Sam Elliott, the mustachioed actor of Westerns, with a French accent.

“You could tell he just didn’t belong,” she said. Crosby offered help but Schirmer mostly wanted to talk, she said, though he was guarded about his family dispute.

Crosby visited him on a weekly basis as spring turned to late summer, and she witnessed his health deteriorate. He drank strong beers to “make the time go by faster,” she recalled him saying. He stopped going to a hotel to clean himself up. He wasn’t eating. He lost control of his bowels. He admitted he was in great physical pain.

“He was just slowly dying, literally, in front of the entire world,” she said.

Rite Aid employees had also taken note of Schirmer’s condition, calling 911 at least three times over three weeks. He’d collapsed in the store but declined aid, they reported. He’d stated he didn’t want to live. He appeared to be dying, an employee told dispatchers on Aug. 6.

The dispatcher alerted Mill Creek police but officers declined to go, records show. Paramedics arrived, followed by a designated crisis responder, who has the authority to involuntarily detain a person under state law. After determining that Schirmer met the criteria for involuntary commitment, someone on scene dialed a Mill Creek police officer.

The officer “stated that even with this paperwork and a DCR on scene, they were still unable to respond and intervene,” according to an incident report by Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue.

Young, Mill Creek’s police chief, said he wasn’t consulted on the decision. He said that before HB 1310 went into effect, officers may have used a minimal amount of force to remove Schirmer from his car. Now, he said, “it doesn’t pass the headline test.”

“Picture this,” he said, offering up a headline for an alternative version of events: “‘Mill Creek police use excessive force on person needing medical assistance.’” He added, “That’s what would be plastered all over the front pages.”

Schirmer’s wife regularly brought him clean clothes and food for a time. But when the crisis responder called on Aug. 6, she declined to check on him, according to an incident report. Persuading him to get help was “a point of contention for a long time,” Julien Schirmer said, and his mother didn’t think going there would make a difference.

Crosby said one of the responders on scene mentioned a new law had been passed. “If he was conscious enough to say, ‘I don’t want help,’ they couldn’t take him away,” she recalls being told. If she could find him unconscious, “then aid would be able to remove him from his vehicle,” she later told police.

Mental health workers and paramedics returned over the next days to try to persuade Schirmer to get medical care, incident reports show.

Crosby kept checking, too. At about 3 p.m. on Aug. 9, Schirmer was less coherent but told her to leave him alone, she later said. She came back five hours later. He was slumped over in the driver’s seat, unconscious, not breathing.

“He’s gone, he’s gone,” a Rite Aid employee told a 911 dispatcher.

Crosby believes Schirmer would have lived if someone had intervened to treat his physical pain and mental distress. “It’s just devastating,” she said as she fought back tears. “Just because he could say ‘no’ didn’t mean ‘no.’”

Schirmer’s wife, contacted by a Times reporter last month, handed the phone to her son Julien. “She’s been very upset about everything,” he said. Julien Schirmer said he expected his father would eventually die but was still shell shocked.

“I was angry at him,” he said, but also “sad, regretful about some things.”

“Fundamental duty”

When told of the circumstances of Schirmer’s decline, state Rep. Roger Goodman, D-Kirkland, blamed the lack of clarity in the legislation and pledged a legislative fix. “We’re going to make clear that police can use reasonable force when assisting mental health professionals in crisis calls,” among other situations, said Goodman, who chairs the House Public Safety Committee.

The new law is unambiguous in one regard. “It is the fundamental duty of law enforcement to preserve and protect all human life,” it states in the second paragraph.

Young, the Mill Creek police chief, said he was “very saddened and disturbed” that his department wasn’t able to do more to prevent Schirmer’s death. “If the Legislature’s intent is to make law enforcement responsible for the preservation of human life, it needs to be unequivocally clarified that law enforcement is permitted to use physical force in all circumstances,” he said. Young [tendered his resignation](#) earlier this month for what he said were “philosophical differences” not related to HB 1310.

A Mill Creek police officer who responded to investigate Schirmer’s death found nothing suspicious. An autopsy later concluded he died of chronic alcoholism, with an ulcer near his bowels listed as a contributing factor.

An investigator for the Medical Examiner’s Office, who joined the officer at the scene, did what no one had managed to do in the weeks prior: He lifted Eric Schirmer’s malnourished body and placed him on a gurney.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Israel ministry recommends US travel ban
SOURCE	https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20211219-israel-set-to-ban-travel-to-us-as-covid-curbs-widen
GIST	<p><i>Jerusalem (AFP)</i> – Israel's health ministry Sunday recommended banning Israelis from travelling to the United States, and added several European countries to its Covid "red list", aimed at containing the Omicron variant's spread.</p> <p>Barring US travel for Israeli citizens and residents would mark a significant step for Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government, given the hundreds of thousands of dual nationals and close ties between the countries.</p> <p>Speaking before Sunday's cabinet meeting, Bennett reiterated that he would continue to restrict travel in order to avoid further lockdowns.</p> <p>"We bought precious time for the State of Israel," by curbing travel immediately after the new variant was detected last month in South Africa, the premier said.</p> <p>"European countries are either in lockdown or are heading that way," he said, stressing that for Israel "time is running out".</p> <p>Lawmakers on Sunday approved an earlier health ministry recommendation to bar Israeli citizens and residents from travelling to France, Ireland, Norway, Spain, Finland, Sweden and the United Arab Emirates.</p> <p>Britain and Denmark were already on the red list, as was most of Africa.</p> <p>In addition to the US, the health ministry recommended that Canada, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Morocco, Portugal, Switzerland and Turkey be red-listed, guidance that is awaiting government approval.</p> <p>Israeli citizens and residents who are already abroad when a country is declared red must quarantine for a week after returning home.</p>

	<p>Foreigners coming from red list countries are barred unless they get special permission.</p> <p>Ran Balicer, chairman of Israel's national expert panel on Covid-19, told AFP the travel rules were allowing for most life to continue as usual inside Israel.</p> <p>"The more strict you are in preventing importation and delaying local transmission, the more lax you can be in disturbing the economy and everyday life," he said.</p> <p>He said that in recent weeks, Israeli health authorities had tested each positive Covid case for presence of the Omicron variant, and conducted contact tracing to stop chains of transmission. As of Friday, 441 cases of Omicron had been detected, he said.</p> <p>Balicer estimated that Israel would ease its restrictions once local transmission of Omicron began to rise, reducing the relative proportion of cases coming in from overseas.</p> <p>He said it was not yet clear if the strain posed a risk of severe illness and death.</p> <p>More than 4.1 million of Israel's estimated 9.3 million people have received three shots of a coronavirus vaccine, with the country currently giving jabs to children aged 5-11.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Shift to severity not case numbers?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/18/politics/white-house-omicron-warning-joe-biden/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)President Joe Biden's top health officials came to an afternoon briefing at the White House Thursday with a warning -- and a request.</p> <p>Sitting at the head of his long conference table surrounded by top members of his Covid response team, Biden listened intently as the officials laid out the contours of a looming coronavirus surge that could accelerate rapidly, swamp hospitals and send the country into another bleak winter.</p> <p>Yet Biden's team also came to the evergreen-bedecked Roosevelt Room with potentially more positive news: Many of those cases will remain mild or even asymptomatic in vaccinated people -- particularly those who have gotten booster shots.</p> <p>It was a message the officials urged Biden to deliver to the public in the clearest terms possible, according to people familiar with the session. Only by laying out the stark difference in outcomes between vaccinated and unvaccinated infections could the gravity of the moment come through.</p> <p>So Biden and his team -- which included Dr. Anthony Fauci, two top vaccine experts from the National Institutes of Health, White House Covid response coordinator Jeff Zients and his deputy Natalie Quillian - set to work writing out by hand the grave warning he would deliver later when cameras were ushered into the room.</p> <p>Biden opened his appearance by declaring he wanted to deliver a "direct message" to the American people.</p> <p>"For the unvaccinated, we are looking at a winter of severe illness and death for the unvaccinated -- for themselves, their families and the hospitals they'll soon overwhelm. But there's good news: If you're vaccinated and you have your booster shot, you're protected from severe illness and death," the President said.</p> <p>He'd determined ahead of time that his message would be muddled if he answered any questions afterward, so he sat uncharacteristically silent as reporters peppered him on their way out.</p>

The emergence of the Omicron variant has thrust the nation -- and the White House -- back into an uncertain pandemic reality, posing both public health and political challenges for a leader whose ultimate success depends almost entirely on his ability to contain the virus.

Already, cases and hospitalizations are surging in some parts of the country, leading to a 31% increase in cases and a 20% increase in hospitalizations from two weeks ago.

[Yet Biden and his team have all but ruled out new lockdowns](#), and behind the scenes, administration officials have been debating how to shift public attention from the total number of cases -- which appear likely to surge, even if many are mild -- toward the number of severe infections that are overloading health systems and causing interruptions to normal life.

A shift toward focusing on severity instead of case numbers

Some of Biden's advisers are encouraging the administration to begin discussing publicly how to live alongside a virus that shows no signs of disappearing, a potentially stark shift in messaging for a White House that once touted "freedom from the virus."

Steering public attention away from the total number of infections and toward serious cases only -- as some Biden advisers have encouraged -- could prove a challenge after nearly two years of intense focus on the pandemic's every up and down. It is a part of a growing conundrum that Biden faces as the Covid-19 pandemic refuses to abate.

"We're getting to the point now where ... it's about severity," said Xavier Becerra, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, in a meeting with reporters this week. "It's not about cases. It's about severity."

Becerra said the issue recently arose during a meeting at the White House with Biden's Covid response team. Other officials also said the issue of how to refocus the public away from total cases toward the severity of illness has been an ongoing subject of discussion within the administration.

"There's a degree of difficulty that now comes in trying to decide what means it's severe and what you have to do to stay out of that threshold of severity," Becerra said. "But I think that's where we're heading, is to try to be able to tell the public that."

Administration officials acknowledge the Omicron surge will likely rip through the country, a psychological setback for a population that's become highly attuned to the pandemic. In some places where vaccination rates lag, the consequences will be debilitating, administration officials fear. But in areas where most people have received their initial shots and boosters, the effects could be minimal.

"You have a Delta surge now that, even if we didn't have Omicron, would be a real challenge for the unvaccinated people. ... That's the ingredients of a perfect storm," a senior administration official said. "That's the reason why the message has to be, 'Get vaccinated -- and if you are vaccinated, get boosted.' "

That is the imperative Biden conveyed in the remarks he crafted with his team in the Roosevelt Room on Thursday. For the President, how to proceed with a new surge is a question not only of public health but also of politics. Biden and his team have long asserted that ending the pandemic and returning the economy to normal is the cure for his political woes. A spike in cases over the summer due to the Delta variant, paired with renewed restrictions and mask requirements, coincided with a softening of his approval ratings.

[Things are different this time, Biden's aides insist](#), noting that more Americans are now vaccinated and citing critical lessons taken from the experience battling Delta.

"We have the tools to fight this virus, including Omicron, and we're in a very different and stronger place than we were a year ago and there is no need to lock down," Zients said this week.

Still, the emergence of Omicron has caused the White House to begin contemplating all of its options ahead of a potential surge. Officials said their priorities include making sure hospitals have the resources to deal with a potential influx of patients, particularly in areas where vaccination rates remain low. The administration has deployed public health surge teams to states experiencing rising cases and hospitalizations. And officials plan to put renewed emphasis on the importance of masking in public places.

"They have to be prepared for any scenario, even if it turns out the disease is less severe," one official said.

Becerra said during the meeting with reporters that the administration may need to ask Congress for more funding to combat the pandemic, citing the unknowns of the new variant.

"Are we going to have more than \$10 billion worth of needs and costs on Covid, especially in regards to testing?" Becerra said. "There's a strong chance we will, depending on where Omicron takes us."

"Tell that quarterback he's got to get the vaccine!"

Biden's stark warning this week came two days after officials from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention presented various models showing the trajectory of the virus during a call with state and local health officials. The modeling, along with data from Europe, indicated the number of Covid-19 cases caused by the Omicron variant has the potential to double every two days.

"When you think about that this virus has the potential to double every two days, then in a couple of weeks we're going to be facing a lot of cases of Omicron," said Lori Tremmel Freeman, chief executive officer of the National Association of County and City Health Officials, who was on part of Tuesday's call.

"That modeling implies that sometime in January, we will be at a different stage of recognizing Omicron, maybe as even a predominant virus. However, we still are learning about the severity, transmissibility," Freeman said. "The data is emerging from around the world."

There are hints from South Africa, where the variant was first identified, that cases could be less severe. And early research suggests vaccinations plus a booster shot continue to protect against severe disease, even if the number of overall cases spikes.

"When you look at the early data, it does appear that there is a diminution in the severity as expressed by hospitalization," Fauci told CNN this week. "The real question is, is that an inherent diminution of virulence of the virus or is it because there are so many people in the population who have already been infected?"

Still, concrete information about the severity of disease caused by Omicron remains something of a mystery. And less severe cases will still require widespread vaccination, which remains elusive in the United States, despite Biden's efforts.

White House officials recently announced new steps to promote vaccination and booster shots, including family clinics that make it convenient for all eligible age groups to receive doses. Yet other aspects of the President's plan to expand vaccinations have stalled. Two major vaccine mandate requirements -- one dealing with federal contractors and another aimed at companies with 100 or more employees -- have been halted by courts.

They haven't only faced legal scrutiny. The mandates have also proved politically difficult for some Democrats, [including two senators who voted with Republicans last week](#) to overturn the rule on private businesses. Some Democratic governors have also expressed unease at the mandate, including Michigan's Gretchen Whitmer, who is otherwise a close ally of the White House.

Biden himself has spared few opportunities to encourage Americans to get vaccinated. Traveling this week in Kentucky -- one of the most conservative pockets he's visited so far as President, and one where only

53.5% of residents are fully vaccinated -- he encountered a woman named Angela wearing a Green Bay Packers hat.

"God love you!" Biden exclaimed, before issuing a light rebuke of Aaron Rogers, the Green Bay player who's refused to get a shot: "Tell that quarterback he's got to get the vaccine."

Problematic pandemic politics

Biden's aides attribute a softening in his approval ratings that began over the summer with the persistent pandemic, which gained steam as the Delta variant spread across the country. [A CNN poll conducted by SSRS released this week](#) found the President's overall approval rating holding about even from a previous survey at 49% approve to 51% disapprove. Those ratings are similar to recent polls from AP-NORC and Reuters/Ipsos.

The only issue tested where Biden's rating exceeds his overall reviews is his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, which 54% approve of. But that is far lower than in April, when 66% said they approved of his handling of Covid.

A renewed surge of Covid also threatens to overwhelm a presidential agenda that suffered another setback this week, when Democrats signaled they would punt Biden's sweeping spending plan to next year after failing to reach an agreement with Sen. Joe Manchin, the West Virginia Democrat who is now the President's chief negotiating counterpart on the plan.

At the White House, the pandemic has dampened another holiday season, despite efforts to maintain normalcy surrounding the festivities. The first lady's office decided to dramatically scale back the usual roster of holiday parties, opting instead for smaller open house-style events.

Guests attending the 30-minute walk-throughs are required to take Covid-19 tests within 48 hours prior to their visits if they cannot attest to being fully vaccinated. Typically, the President and first lady can host several dozen events during the holiday season, sometimes making appearances at more than one per day. At some, they can stand for hours taking photos and shaking hands.

This year, Biden chose instead to thank supporters at a holiday reception at a nearby hotel. Speaking at a cocktail reception there Tuesday evening, he didn't avoid his disappointment at another Christmas made less merry by the raging pandemic.

"I had hoped by now each one of you, who helped us get to where we are, would have had full access to the White House," he said. "We had all kinds of plans. ... We hoped people had moved on to getting all their vaccines."

Despite the imminent surge, he held out hope that things would soon return to normal: "Next year -- and this year, before it's over -- in the White House. In the White House," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/18 Firefighters Disney World: guests in danger
SOURCE	https://www.bakersfield.com/ap/national/firefighters-at-disney-world-say-guests-are-in-danger-because-of-short-staffing/article_d35806d0-9a05-505a-9c32-e19211ed168d.html
GIST	<p>ORLANDO, Fla. — A woman at a hotel within Walt Disney World had a heart attack in the middle of the day this past Sunday.</p> <p>The call came from the Bay Lake Tower hotel near the Magic Kingdom while the only rescue vehicle for the area was on another call, according to union members of the Reedy Creek Fire Department, which serves the resort.</p> <p>A call log from the department showed a medic team arrived within nine minutes of dispatch, but it took over 13 minutes for a rescue unit from another zone to arrive and 20 minutes before the woman was given epinephrine, a critical treatment. The woman died that afternoon.</p>

Had more people initially responded, she likely would have received the drug sooner and would have had a better chance of survival, Jon Shirey, president of the Reedy Creek Firefighters Association, told the Orlando Sentinel in an interview.

“Time is tissue; time, in this case, is life-saving,” he said. “The average person has about four to six minutes to be in cardiac arrest without some of these life-saving treatments before there’s permanent brain damage or irreversible death.”

For the first responders at Disney, the call realized their worst fear: that the short staffing they say the department has been working with for years would endanger guests and possibly prove to be fatal.

As the resort welcomes a busy holiday season, its firefighters and paramedics say they are bracing to be stretched further. They claim they are increasingly relying on outside fire departments to respond to calls and take people to hospitals, which can lead to delayed care at vital times.

The union is in arbitration with the district over the staffing issue, pushing for more first responders.

“We’re putting people who are visiting Disney in danger,” said Tim Stromsnes, the union’s communications director.

Disney spokesman Avery Maehrer called the union’s claims about safety at Disney “simply not true.”

“The safety of everyone who comes to Walt Disney World Resort has always been extremely important to us, and we are grateful to all the first responders who continue to keep our property safe,” he wrote in a statement.

Union members say the Reedy Creek Improvement District, which runs the resort’s emergency services, reduced staffing when the parks closed in March 2020 as part of an agreement to avoid layoffs, and now they are not adequately staffed to respond to a fire at a resort hotel, much less a large-scale emergency.

“It’s a huge danger,” Shirey said. “If there is a big event, we’re not even remotely close to being able to handle it on our own.”

Eryka Washington, Reedy Creek spokeswoman, responded by saying Reedy Creek prioritizes safety and ensures the fire department has “appropriate levels of fire and medical services at all times,” including at Disney’s theme parks.

She confirmed that the district did not lay anyone off while the parks were closed because of the pandemic and paid EMT staff’s salaries for 16 weeks while they were at home. Washington did not provide any details on the minimum staffing agreement and would not provide additional information about the union’s staffing claims on the record.

In the case of the heart attack, the fire department used to have two rescues assigned to the Magic Kingdom area, but smaller shift staffing has led to gaps in coverage, Stromsnes said.

Washington said the response times for the call were normal and four units were at the hotel within 14 minutes of the call.

Shirey was not on the call, but he said normally an engine and a rescue arrive at the same time for such incidents and having additional units would have sped up treatment. The call log shows an engine was assigned within two minutes of the medic unit but was canceled on the way as another engine responded and arrived 14 minutes after the medic unit was assigned.

No new staff, firefighters claim

Firefighters say Reedy Creek has not increased its firefighter staffing since 1989. In those 32 years, Disney has added another theme park — Animal Kingdom — another water park — Blizzard Beach — several new hotels and expanded the Disney Springs shopping district.

Sean Pierce, a lieutenant paramedic, said he started working at Reedy Creek in 1997, when minimum staffing was 30 personnel per shift. He said as calls for help increase and the resort expands, firefighters are expected to do more with less.

“Disney doesn’t build a theme park and then say, ‘Hey, we’re going to take a third of the employees from the Magic Kingdom, from Animal Kingdom and [Hollywood] Studios and we’ll supply Epcot with the employees.’ When they build a park, they open up and they hire employees,” he said. “So why isn’t the fire department doing that?”

Minimum staffing per shift at the Reedy Creek Fire Department is currently 26 firefighters spread across five ambulances and four fire engines, Shirey said.

These 26 people are responsible for responding across Disney’s theme parks and hotels and accidents on neighboring sections of I-4 and State Road 429.

The union alleges Reedy Creek has continued to operate on the temporary staffing agreement made as the pandemic started, resulting in smaller staffing even as Disney returns to normal operations. That deal is the cause of the arbitration, Shirey said.

Pre-pandemic, the department had 32 firefighters between eight ambulances and four fire engines per shift, Shirey said.

A national standard for firefighting set by the National Fire Protection Association recommends at least 42 firefighters respond to fires in high-rise buildings, defined as those with floors higher than 75 feet “above the lowest level of fire department vehicle access.”

During peak times, Magic Kingdom used to have up to three medic units of two people each in the park, while Epcot and Hollywood Studios had two and Animal Kingdom one, Shirey said.

Now, all parks except Magic Kingdom have one medic unit in the park, he said, placing two people in charge of the initial medical response for thousands of guests and staff.

Magic Kingdom has two units, but their shifts only overlap during peak hours, Shirey said. The theme park is the most-visited in the world, with nearly 7 million visitors in 2020 and 21 million in 2019, data from the Themed Entertainment Association showed.

Neither Disney nor Reedy Creek would discuss the specific staffing allegations raised by the union.

The staffing also affects members of the special operations team, which evacuates riders from complex rides and transportation when they break down, including the monorail and gondola system, Shirey said.

Rescue from the Skyliner could take 60 to 90 minutes for each of the gondola’s 300 cabins with optimal staffing, he said. Fellow firefighters refuse to ride it.

“I wouldn’t go on the Skyliner, because I think we’re grossly understaffed to do an effective rescue on that,” Stromsnes said.

When the Skyliner stalled in October 2019, it stranded passengers in the air, at least one without necessary medication, for nearly three hours.

The district’s website shows it is hiring firefighters and paramedics. Shirey said the district told firefighters they were looking to start the process in January, but Washington would not comment on that.

When the union has brought up its concerns, the response has been that the call volume does not show the need for larger staffing, Shirey and other firefighters said.

“They’re not worried about staffing for the ‘what if’ calls, but ... that’s exactly what we’re here for,” Shirey said. “We are here for those ‘what if’ situations, those truly traumatic incidents, and so to not staff with that in mind just seems kind of foolish.”

Relying on other departments

Fewer firefighters mean fewer resources, especially vehicles able to take patients to hospitals, and the Reedy Creek Fire Department has increasingly called on nearby agencies for assistance.

From September through November 2021, the Orange County Fire Rescue dispatched 33 calls to Reedy Creek’s coverage area, an increase from 11 over the same timeframe in 2020 when the parks were operating at reduced capacity because of the pandemic, and from 18 in 2019, data provided by agency spokeswoman Lisa McDonald show.

The Osceola County Fire Rescue dispatched Reedy Creek calls three times this year over those three months, compared with no calls in 2020 and 2019, representative Andrew Sullivan said.

Reedy Creek’s mutual aid data conflicts with those numbers, showing Orange County assisted with 29 total EMS and fire calls and Osceola County seven over that timeframe this year, compared with 14 and 0 in 2020 and 9 and 0 in 2019, respectively.

Firefighters say these calls are becoming more frequent this month. On Dec. 4, Orange County responded to three calls from Reedy Creek, county data show. Reedy Creek’s logs show one call.

Andre Perez, president of the Orange County Fire Fighters Association, said mutual aid calls take away from the agency’s services for county residents.

“As [Reedy Creek’s] call load increases and they are unable to respond their full resources to those calls, then that puts a strain on our system,” he said.

County firefighters take longer to respond to Reedy Creek calls and are not as familiar with Disney locations, both of which can cause delays, Perez said.

McDonald said the department was “not aware of any issues of access on Disney property” and conducts collaborative training with Reedy Creek at Disney.

A letter of warning

On June 14, the union’s secretary Pete Simon wrote Greg Hale, Disney’s chief safety officer, about the fire department’s staffing amid increasing call volume. Hale responded that the matter should be discussed with the fire department.

“I am confident that the Fire Department administration will maintain an appropriate level of staffing to support the taxpayers in the District,” Hale wrote in an email provided by Shirey.

Five days later, a person dining at the Boathouse restaurant at Disney Springs had a seizure. Reedy Creek firefighters responded but did not have an ambulance available, Shirey said.

An Orange County Fire Rescue team arrived within 22 minutes of dispatch, agency spokeswoman Ashley Gipson said.

Concerned, Shirey emailed Hale that the delay demonstrated the firefighters’ worries.

“Had this call been of a more serious, life and death matter, I can assure you this Guest would be dead,” Shirey wrote. “They would not just be dead, but they would have died in front of quite the large audience of fellow diners, all wondering why the fire department sat on scene for nearly an hour instead of transporting. For my crews’ sake, for the sake of the fire department and Disney reputation, I urge you to at least dig into this issue a bit further.”

Shirey said Hale did not respond.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Omicron starts to take toll on business
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-starts-to-take-its-toll-on-business-11639940554?mod=hp_lead_pos2
GIST	<p>In a matter of days, Covid-19’s accelerating spread hampered operations for some companies and slowed sales at others, as workers fell sick and co-workers and customers became more cautious. Still, many say they hope precautions adapted during previous coronavirus surges will suffice for this one and that business can motor on.</p> <p>Restaurants were among businesses most immediately hit.</p> <p>Chris Fuselier, owner of the Blake Street Tavern in downtown Denver, said his business has fallen since the Omicron variant began to be detected in the area and the city instituted new Covid-19-related restrictions last month. “We’ve had a huge slowdown the past three weeks,” he said.</p> <p>Mr. Fuselier said one of his employees also caught the virus in recent days. He shut down the bar and restaurant’s weekday lunch service last week. “We were hopeful the downtown workers would come back to their offices with the New Year,” he said. “Now, companies are telling workers to stay home due to Omicron.”</p> <p>For the week ended Nov. 28, U.S. restaurant seatings were down 4% from 2019 levels, according to data from the website of reservation service OpenTable. A week later, they were down 9% by the same metrics. The following week, ended Dec. 12, seatings were down 12%, according to the company.</p> <p>“The last 72 hours is really where things seem to be escalating,” said New York restaurant owner Gabriel Stulman on Saturday night after around nine employees across his four restaurants tested positive for Covid-19. Others were struggling to get tests, he said.</p> <p>That led to Mr. Stulman’s Joseph Leonard restaurant in Manhattan not having enough staff to open for brunch on Saturday. He had hoped the restaurant could still open for dinner because Saturday is one of its busiest days, making up roughly 25% of the week’s revenue. Then, another positive test came in and he closed the restaurant through Monday. Mr. Stulman’s restaurants are among those seeking more aid from Congress.</p> <p>Lance Lappin, owner of an eponymous hair salon in downtown Manhattan for about 37 years, said that in the past few days three or four customers have canceled appointments saying they had been near someone who had tested positive for Covid-19.</p> <p>Mr. Lappin said his customer base for years has included many people who worked in offices. But expectations for the return of workers keep getting dashed. Now, “there’s no anchor to even hold onto,” he said. “It’s frustrating and exhausting.”</p> <p>Businesses of all kinds have been contending with pandemic-related setbacks for nearly two years, from supply-chain woes and labor shortages to higher costs and shifting government rules. Many businesses closed. But thanks in part to myriad forms of government stimulus and enduring consumer demand, many so far have navigated the pandemic and have even bolstered profits. The fast-spreading Omicron variant presents the latest test.</p>

[Citing a surge of Covid-19 cases at CNN](#), network President Jeff Zucker on Saturday told staffers it was closing its New York City office with the exception of those who need to be there to perform their jobs. The network, which had been using its full-scale studios for its shows, will go back to using smaller “flash studios” that can be operated remotely by fewer people, according to a person familiar with the matter.

NBC’s “Saturday Night Live” decided against having a studio audience at the weekend’s show, and several cast and crew members were sidelined with Covid-19. “Tonight, everyone at ‘Saturday Night Live’ planned to do our big Christmas show ... but Covid came early this year,” guest Tom Hanks said during the show’s opening.

In Germany, caravan manufacturer LMC Caravan GmbH halted production on Wednesday evening after an Omicron outbreak at its factory in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Some 47 employees tested positive for the new variant, the company said. Dozens of others have tested positive for coronavirus in rapid tests and are expecting confirmation via a PCR test. LMC plans to resume production on Jan. 4.

The outbreak dismayed LMC’s management because the factory had a vaccination rate of roughly 75% and a mask mandate, and anyone who was unvaccinated had to be tested daily. “We were shocked,” Rene Ricken, LMC’s managing director, said in a written statement.

“People everywhere are finding it hard to summon the energy for another chapter in the story,” McKinsey & Co. wrote in a blog post for clients on Wednesday.

The consultancy’s analysis found in a base-case scenario of the latest evidence that Omicron could succeed Delta as the dominant U.S. variant in the next few months and lead to a higher peak burden of disease than the U.S. experienced in the second half of 2021.

Some evidence suggests consumers are hunkering down again. Shoppers have been making fewer visits to physical stores in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Foot traffic to stores was 23% lower for the week ended Dec. 18, compared with the same week in 2019, according to Sensormatic Solutions, which tracks footsteps with cameras placed at stores. That is a deceleration from the preceding two weeks, when traffic was 18% and 14% lower than the corresponding weeks in 2019.

It is unclear whether the slowdown is because of concerns over the Omicron variant or other factors, such as many consumers choosing to start holiday shopping earlier this year.

John Smith, chief executive of Wood-Mizer LLC, said the Indianapolis-based wood-processing company this month moved its first in-person board meeting to virtual at the last minute because of Omicron-related travel policies that could affect its European-based directors.

“We feared that they might get here and be stuck for an extended period,” he said.

Boston-based Ropes & Gray LLP canceled its 200-person law-firm partner lunch on Dec. 15, the eve of its annual gathering, because of safety considerations and Omicron’s spread, said Julie Jones, chair of the 3,000-person firm.

Several people weren’t panicking.

Ryan Gilbert, the manager of the Mysterious Bookshop in Lower Manhattan, said Saturday that the store was as busy with shoppers as it is traditionally at this time of the year. Geppetto’s Toy Box in Oak Park, Ill., was also bustling the Saturday before Christmas. Eric Masoncup, owner of the upscale toy store in the Chicago suburb, said concern over the latest variant hasn’t deterred shoppers so far this season, because people are eager to leave their homes.

Costco Wholesale Corp. isn’t experiencing new buying patterns in its stores, Chief Financial Officer Richard Galanti said Saturday. The warehouse retailer hasn’t changed business practices in stores or

offices because of Omicron, he said, but “there was more discussion this week than there was last Friday” about it and the situation is fluid, Mr. Galanti said.

Michael McKelvy, CEO of construction firm Gilbane Building Co., said Sunday it is business as usual for the company’s offices and construction sites, where it has been encouraging vaccination, testing and face coverings. He said that while the company has been closely watching guidance and updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, he is hopeful “we can manage the Omicron variant similar to how we have worked through the Delta variant.”

Industrial real-estate company Prologis Inc. still plans to broadly reopen its San Francisco headquarters on Jan. 10, though employees can work remotely, CEO Hamid Moghadam said. Mr. Moghadam said the company has already shifted its office’s opening date multiple times and he is reluctant to delay again. He added that it is unlikely there will be a clear pandemic end date when “we’re going to say, ‘OK, the day after whatever, everything’s going to be fine.’ ”

LendingTree Inc. CEO Doug Lebda so far hasn’t changed any Covid-19 protocols for the Charlotte, N.C.-based company’s employees because of Omicron, he said.

Mr. Lebda plans on being back in LendingTree’s offices, where vaccinations are required, during the first week of January, barring a significant change in infection numbers, he said. “I will be back unless this gets much worse, and then we will adjust and tell people to stay at home,” he said.

Brad Karp, chairman of law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison LLP said the firm had encouraged vaccinated employees to spend the majority of their time in the office but in recent weeks decided against that requirement for the last two weeks of the year. “The transmissibility of Omicron and the surge in infections on the eve of the holidays makes our decision quite obvious,” he said.

Fidelity Investments said last week that it paused a voluntary return-to-office pilot program at some of its locations. Essential workers, such as those working on the company’s facilities team or in some operational roles, would still be coming into offices, a company spokesman said, adding that Fidelity hadn’t set a broad return-to-office date. “Our return to offices is focused more on the ‘how’ as opposed to the ‘when,’ ” he said.

The electronic dance-rock band LCD Soundsystem said Friday that it would keep the remaining dates of its Brooklyn shows, which run through Tuesday. The group said it came close to canceling the dates, but learned that half the ticket holders were from out of town and said those fans who had traveled and booked hotels would be “irate.”

The band said fans who want refunds would get priority access for tickets later. “We said we would play, and people are coming, so we are playing,” the group’s note read. The message also urged caution: “Us playing the shows is in no way an indicator that it’s safe to attend.”

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HEADLINE	12/19 Omicron raging; travel increases risks
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/19/us-covid-fauci-omicron-variant-raging-travel-risks
GIST	<p>The Omicron variant of Covid-19 has “extraordinary spreading capabilities”, the top US infectious diseases expert said on Sunday, and promises to bring a bleak winter as it continues “raging through the world”.</p> <p>Dr Anthony Fauci’s warning came ahead of the busy holiday travel period, which he said would elevate the risk of infection even in vaccinated people.</p> <p>In an interview with NBC’s Meet the Press, Fauci, Joe Biden’s chief medical adviser and head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, urged Americans to get booster shots and wear masks.</p>

He also appeared to attempt damage control over Vice-President Kamala Harris's contention that the Biden administration ["didn't see"](#) the Omicron or Delta variants coming.

Harris's comments on Friday were "taken out of context", Fauci insisted, and referred to the "extraordinary number of mutations" of Covid-19 rather than any lack of readiness.

"We were well prepared and expected that we were going to see variants," he said. "There's no doubt about that."

Fauci looked ahead to a scheduled national address by Biden on Tuesday, in which he said the president would "upscale" elements of the White House Covid winter plan.

"He's going to stress several things," Fauci said. "... Getting people boosted who are vaccinated, getting children vaccinated, making testing more available, having surge teams out, because we know we're going to need them because there will be an increased demand on hospitalisation."

The White House reset comes at the end of a week in which the US [surpassed 800,000 deaths](#) from coronavirus and saw a [17% surge in cases](#) and a 9% rise in deaths.

Medical experts have warned of an Omicron-fueled ["viral blizzard"](#) sweeping the country. Biden has spoken of a ["winter of severe illness and death"](#) among the unvaccinated.

Fauci repeated such dire predictions on CNN's State of the Union.

"One thing that's clear is [Omicron's] extraordinary capability of spreading, its transmissibility capability," he said. "It is just raging through the world."

"This virus is extraordinary. It has a doubling time of anywhere from two to three days in certain regions of the country, which means it's going to take over. If you look at what it's done in South Africa, what it's doing in the UK, and what it's starting to do right now, the president is correct."

"It is going to be tough. We can't walk away from that because with the Omicron that we're dealing with it is going to be a tough few weeks to months as we get deeper into the winter. We are going to see significant stress in some regions of the country, on the hospital system, particularly in those areas where you have a low level of vaccination."

Many cases of Omicron are so-called "breakthrough" infections. [Florida](#), one of the hardest-hit states throughout the pandemic, reported on Sunday that about [30% of new infections](#) were in people vaccinated but yet to receive a booster.

Fauci and other experts have said immunisations alone will not prevent the spread of Omicron, but are confident that the risk of serious disease or death is vastly reduced in those who are vaccinated.

Dr Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, told CBS's Face the Nation he was concerned about the effects of Omicron on those who are not vaccinated.

"It's a brand new version and so different that it has the properties to potentially be evasive of the vaccines and other measures that we've taken," he said.

"The big message for today is if you've had vaccines and a booster you're very well protected against Omicron causing you severe disease. Anybody who's in that 60% of Americans who are eligible for a booster but haven't yet gotten one, this is the week to do it. Do not wait."

In New York, authorities said [22,000 people tested positive](#) for Covid-19 on Friday, eclipsing the previous record since testing became widely available.

Meanwhile, a study in South Africa this week suggested that the Pfizer vaccine has a weaker efficacy against Omicron in patients who have received two doses than it does against the Delta variant.

The [research by Discovery Health](#), the country's largest medical insurance administrator, calculated a 70% protection from hospitalization compared with the unvaccinated, and 33% protection against infection. The group said that represented a drop from 93% hospitalization protection and 80% infection prevention for Delta.

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HEADLINE	12/17 CDC: exposed unvax students 'test-to-stay'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/health/unvaccinated-children-covid-testing-cdc.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Health
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said on Friday that unvaccinated students exposed to the coronavirus can remain in school, as long as they are tested for the virus twice in the week after and both tests come back negative.</p> <p>The new guidance, known as the “test-to-stay” protocol, could ease the burden on children who have been expected to stay home if a close contact tested positive for the virus, and on parents who have had to scramble to retrieve them from school or find day care. It also aims to minimize disruptions to learning as two highly contagious variants of the virus spread across the country, causing some school closures and threatening to upend the strategies that federal and state officials adopted to return to in-person classes in the fall.</p> <p>Although some schools and districts are already using the test-to-stay approach, the C.D.C. had not previously endorsed it, citing a lack of evidence. On Friday, the agency released studies from two counties, one in California and the other in Illinois, that effectively tested the protocol and found that it worked.</p> <p>The studies were conducted before the fast-moving Omicron variant began spreading in the United States. Scientists are still investigating many basic questions about the variant, including whether it increases the risk of in-school transmission.</p> <p>“Even with the recent increase in Omicron variant, we expect that these prevention strategies will continue to work,” Kristen Nordlund, a C.D.C. spokeswoman, said in a statement on Friday. “However, as we learn more about the Omicron variant, C.D.C. will continue to review and update guidance as needed.”</p> <p>The new policy, hinted at in the winter Covid-19 plan that President Biden unveiled this month, still calls on students to wear masks and socially distance, and applies only to those who remain asymptomatic. Until now, unvaccinated students were expected to quarantine at home for as long as two weeks after exposure. Some states have had tens of thousands of students in quarantine.</p> <p>“While over 99 percent of schools are open now, we need to make sure we keep that throughout the winter,” Mr. Biden said as he announced the plan. “We want our children in school.”</p> <p>Vaccinated students with exposures have generally been allowed to remain in school as long as they are asymptomatic and wear a mask. Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the C.D.C. director, said at a news conference on Friday that students participating in test-to-stay programs should be tested at least twice during the seven-day period after an exposure.</p> <p>In one of the studies the C.D.C. released on Friday, students at schools in Los Angeles County that did not participate in a pilot test-to-stay program, and who had to quarantine, lost an estimated 92,455 in-person school days from Sept. 20 to Oct. 31. In schools participating in the pilot, students exposed to the virus lost no days. Those schools also did not see increases in virus rates among students.</p>

	In Lake County, Illinois, where the other study took place, researchers estimated that up to 8,152 in-person learning days were saved from August to October in schools that participated in the program. Of the 16 students in the program who tested positive for the virus in the two weeks after exposure, none appeared to transmit it to others at school, the report said.
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HEADLINE	12/18 LASD delays student vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/us/los-angeles-vaccine-mandate-delayed.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20News
GIST	<p>By at least one important measure, the Los Angeles school district's plan to require vaccinations for students 12 and older has been a success: Three months after the mandate was announced, almost 90 percent of those students had complied.</p> <p>Nevertheless, the Los Angeles Unified School District — the first major district in the United States to call for such a mandate — decided this week to slow things down. Board members voted 6-1 not to enforce the vaccine deadline, originally scheduled for Jan. 10, until fall 2022.</p> <p>That's because the district did not know what to do with the tens of thousands of students who were still unvaccinated.</p> <p>The delay illustrated the challenges that schools across the country could face if they mandate vaccinations for children: a dearth of good alternatives for students who don't comply, and the resulting ripple effects that could strain districts' resources, hurting even those students who do get the shot.</p> <p>The decision in Los Angeles came at what seemed like an inopportune time: The Omicron coronavirus variant is surging in regions of the United States, which means that schools will most likely need to handle yet another wave of the pandemic. And vaccines — especially booster shots — still appear to offer protection against severe illness.</p> <p>“Mandates are valuable, they are useful, and we know that they increase vaccination rates,” said Shira Shafir, an associate professor of epidemiology with the Fielding School of Public Health at the University of California, Los Angeles. “But districts simultaneously need to be prepared for the possibility that even though they work, they will not work for 100 percent of all people, necessarily.”</p> <p>Los Angeles announced its mandate in September, but officials in other major cities like Atlanta, Chicago and New York have taken a more cautious approach with schools, opting instead to wait for full F.D.A. approval of vaccines for children or citing concerns that mandates might push students out of class.</p> <p>This week, New Orleans officials announced that children 5 and older must be vaccinated by Feb. 1 to attend school, but offered exemptions for medical, religious or philosophical reasons.</p> <p>Joe and Charlene Mardesic, whose 12-year-old daughter attends middle school in Los Angeles, said they were prepared to pull her out if the mandate had taken effect next month. The delay, Mr. Mardesic said, was “excellent news.”</p> <p>“We wanted to find out more about the vaccine, and let it be tested more stringently, instead of it being on an emergency use authorization,” he added. “We wanted to wait until the F.D.A. fully approves it before we said, ‘OK, now our daughter can be vaccinated.’”</p> <p>The Food and Drug Administration has authorized the Pfizer vaccine for use in children between the ages of 5 and 15, and it is fully approved for people 16 and older.</p> <p>The Los Angeles school district said the mandate has already had a positive effect, even without enforcement. Megan K. Reilly, the interim superintendent, said in a statement last week that 87 percent of students between the ages of 12 and 18 had complied with the mandate. (Some of those may have been</p>

exempted rather than vaccinated, and some families whose children are vaccinated had not been counted because they had yet to upload proof of vaccination.)

“This is a major milestone,” Ms. Reilly said, “and there’s still more time to get vaccinated!”

Dr. Shafir agreed that the compliance rate was impressive and said it was important to note that the decision to delay was made for logistical and infrastructural reasons. “It is not being made for public health reasons,” she said. “Nothing has changed about the vaccine or about the need for the vaccine.”

What did change is that officials realized that the students who remained unvaccinated — amounting to about 30,000 — threatened to overwhelm the district’s resources.

This summer, California lawmakers promoted [independent study programs as an option](#) for children who did not want to return to class during the pandemic. In Los Angeles, that led to a surge of interest in [City of Angels](#), a program that had long offered independent learning plans, typically to accommodate students with odd schedules because of, say, health issues or acting jobs.

Enrollment there has swollen to 16,000, from around 1,300 before the pandemic. And if a mandate were enforced next month, more teachers would have been diverted to help run the independent study program, which would in turn hurt the students who stayed in traditional schools, according to Jackie Goldberg, a school board member who voted to delay enforcing the mandate.

Already, [parents and students](#) at City of Angels — many of whom have disabilities or compromised immune systems — have [expressed deep frustrations](#) with the program.

“It’s a mess,” Ms. Goldberg said. “It was never intended to be a school replacement. It was intended to be temporary independent study.”

The school district did not immediately answer questions about the challenges facing City of Angels, and its principal did not respond to a request for comment.

“We didn’t remove the mandate, and I want to be very clear about that,” Ms. Goldberg added. “We are delaying enforcement, because to enforce it would actually disadvantage the people who complied.”

One school board member, George McKenna, voted against the change and said at the Tuesday meeting that without the mandate, even vaccinated students would be more at risk of infection in the classroom. “We’re trying to protect the children under our care,” he said, “and we do have the authority to do that.” “If we delay the effective date of the requirement, it dilutes the intent,” he added.

Suellen Hopfer, an assistant professor of public health and pediatrics with the Center for Virus Research at the University of California, Irvine, [surveyed parents of adolescents](#) and found that some cited mandates as their primary motivation for vaccinating their children.

“Public health and school officials need to send a strong, unified message on the importance and safety of vaccinating,” she said, adding that they should emphasize the importance of vaccination now, not later — especially given the unpredictability of variants.

Ahead of their vote to delay enforcement, school board members stressed that unvaccinated students will have to be tested regularly, and that the district would keep up its outreach efforts to help as many students as possible meet the new deadline.

But Los Angeles is a big district — the nation’s second most populous, with more than 600,000 students — and even if the vaccination rate for students 12 and older exceeded 95 percent, thousands would still be unvaccinated.

	<p>A number of things could change before the next school year begins. Full F.D.A. approval for children's vaccinations, for instance, would prompt the state to impose its own mandate, adding the coronavirus to the list of diseases that students must be vaccinated against, like measles and mumps. (That is scheduled for July, according to the governor's office.) And Ms. Goldberg said that she hoped California would change a law that she said limits students' options for remote learning and ultimately pushes too many into independent study programs that cannot accommodate them.</p> <p>But for now, it still remains unclear where unvaccinated students will go once the mandate is enforced.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 California snow drought ends dramatically
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/19/weather/weather-drought-california-snowpack/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Thanks to multiple atmospheric river events, average snowpack in California has gone from 18% to 98% in just two weeks.</p> <p>"Increases in snowpack of this size are not common, but also not unprecedented," Julie Kalansky, deputy director of operations for the Center for Western Weather and Water Extremes (CW3E), explained.</p> <p>Kalansky pointed out previous studies have shown a jump on this scale can happen about twice every three years, but usually over the course of an entire winter, not just the month of December.</p> <p>While they don't have the exact rankings for each month of the year, "most of the storm events in the study we referenced for the above calculation were in the second half of December and later into the season," Kalansky added.</p> <p>The sudden change gives California its wettest start to the Water Year in more than 40 years, thanks to several drought-denting rain and snow systems pushing through the area in recent weeks. The Water Year runs from October 1 through September 30 of the following year.</p> <p>Parts of California are known for whiplash weather, but the rapid changes are quite remarkable given the snowpack was off to such a rough start, after a very warm and dry November for much of the state.</p> <p>Northern California is doing a little better in terms of its water year, compared to where it was last year. While not at record levels, the National Weather Service (NWS) office in Sacramento tweeted the Northern Sierra precipitation is above average for this time of year, and exceptionally better than the same time last year.</p> <p>However, Southern California was only able to take advantage of one of the larger atmospheric river systems recently.</p> <p>"The Tuesday storm that brought 1 to 2 inches of rain to the coastal and valley areas put a dent in our rainfall deficit," the NWS office in San Diego said last week.</p> <p>The area was so far behind prior to last week's storm, the recent rainfall only brought the region back to where it normally should be at this time of year, rather than ahead.</p> <p>California is just one state in the West, and not all states are equal in terms of moisture received by recent storms.</p> <p>"While stormy weather in December increased snowpack in California, snow water equivalent is at record lows in some stations in NM, CO, UT, MT, WY, NV," the National Integrated Drought Information System (NIDIS) said in a tweet.</p> <p>The Sierras can collect a lot of the moisture from big storms, but block it from entering neighboring states.</p>

A US Department of Agriculture snow [mapping tool](#) showed while some areas of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, and Arizona have relatively high snow water equivalent percentages, other states such as Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming are struggling, compared to average totals.

Snow deficits in Colorado affect millions more people beyond the state's borders. When the snowpack melts in the spring it supplies the Colorado River Basin's water supply.

Chelsea Peters, a meteorologist with the NWS office in Las Vegas explained Intermountain West snowpack, or lack thereof, can have cascading impacts on southwestern states, especially if snowpack levels are below average for several years in a row.

"Several years of below-normal snowpack across the Intermountain West mountains that supply the Colorado River Basin will continue to increase the water supply stress, which was already in jeopardy due to population increase," Peters said. "We recently saw this impact reservoir storage and lake levels in Lake Mead and Lake Powell. Within the last year, both Lake Powell and Lake Mead have observed their lowest reservoir storage levels in 30 years."

More storms on the way

More rain and snow is entering the West Coast thanks to three separate waves of moisture.

The first arrived Saturday in the Pacific Northwest, bringing heavy coastal rain and mountain snow, creating dangerous travel conditions along the Cascades.

Sunday, the low pressure system will shift south into Oregon and northern California.

Snowfall totals will range from 3-6 inches for interior northwestern states, with as much as 2-3 feet for the highest elevations of the Cascade, Sierra, and northern Rocky Mountains.

The CW3E is forecasting a Level 3 atmospheric river event for the western states.

An atmospheric river pumps incredible amounts of moisture off the Pacific Ocean into Western states, resulting in very heavy rain and snow.

By Monday and Tuesday, heavy precipitation will spread from Washington to central California.

"Rain and snow chances return by early next week, becoming widespread by late Monday," the NWS office in Sacramento said Saturday. "A series of storms will continue this threat through the week into next weekend. Mountain travel will likely be significantly impacted at times."

Over the next five days, widespread rainfall totals of 2-4 inches are expected along the coastlines and lowlands.

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HEADLINE	12/19 'Tsunami coming' for unvaccinated
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/19/health/us-coronavirus-sunday/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Forget the waves of Covid-19, one expert says "there's a tsunami coming" for unvaccinated Americans as the Delta variant continues to fuel new cases and hospitalizations and the Omicron variant is spreading rapidly and could soon swamp hospital systems.</p> <p>"This Omicron variant is extraordinarily contagious. It's as contagious as measles, and that's about the most contagious virus that we've seen," CNN medical analyst Jonathan Reiner told CNN's Pamela Brown Saturday.</p> <p>Cases of Omicron are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in the countries where community transmissions are documented, the World Health Organization said Saturday.</p>

And in the US, Omicron is expected to become the "dominant strain" in the coming weeks, US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Friday.

The US was averaging 126,967 new cases of Covid-19 per day as of Saturday, [according to Johns Hopkins University](#), and fourteen states saw an uptick of at least 10% in cases over the past week compared to the previous week, the data shows.

Scientists say it's still too early to tell whether Omicron causes a milder form of Covid-19 disease, but regardless, it will put pressure on the health care system.

"Why would you go into that kind of battle completely unarmed?," Reiner said. "Our vaccines will protect you, particularly if you are triple vaxed. People who are unvaxed should start the process now. Go ahead and go to your pharmacy and get vaccinated," he said.

Reiner, a professor of medicine and surgery at George Washington University School of Medicine & Health Sciences, said he believes almost everyone will be exposed to the virus, though those who are triple vaccinated will not necessarily contract Covid-19.

"But I do not think that we need to just throw our hands up in the air and say, 'Look, we're all going to get it so let's just let it burn through the country.' If we do that, our hospitals will be swamped," he said.

Reiner said even if Omicron ends up causing less severe infection than Delta, the sheer number of cases it could generate could overwhelm US hospitals.

"We need to protect our health care system, and that's why every American needs to mask up and vax up right now because our health care infrastructure is at stake right now," he said.

[According to CDC data](#), 61.4% of the total US population is fully vaccinated and 29.1% of those have received a booster.

More than 69,000 people are hospitalized with Covid-19 across the US and more than 20% of all ICU beds are occupied by Covid-19 patients, according to the [US Department of Health and Human Services](#).

New York tops record for daily new cases

On Saturday, New York State broke its record for the highest single-day Covid-19 case count since the beginning of the pandemic for a second consecutive day, with [Gov. Kathy Hochul's office](#) reporting 21,908 positive Covid-19 cases, up from 21,027 on Friday.

Covid-19 hospitalizations across the state [remained relatively low](#) at 3,909, compared to a peak of 18,825 Covid-19 related hospitalizations on April 13, 2020, according to available data.

"This is not like the beginning of the pandemic," Hochul said in a statement Saturday. "We are prepared for the winter surge because we have the tools at our disposal."

In New York City, positive Covid-19 cases more than doubled from the beginning of the week on December 13 to Saturday, although Covid-19 hospitalizations remained around the same throughout the week with a slight spike in hospitalizations reported Saturday, according to data released by Mayor Bill de Blasio's office.

"We're definitely going to get a tsunami of cases," Director of Global Health and Emergency Medicine at Columbia University Medical Center Dr. Craig Spencer told CNN Saturday. "We know that today we had record level cases here in New York City that only eclipses yesterday's record level of cases. We know that a lot of people are going to test positive."

The surge has already hit the entertainment industry in the city.

This week's "[Saturday Night Live](#)" went without an audience and aired mostly pre-taped segments due to the rise in Covid-19 cases.

The move followed the [cancellation of some Broadway performances](#) and the Radio City Rockettes' "[Christmas Spectacular](#)" shows for the rest of the year.

Hospitals are feeling the impact

New York isn't the only state grappling with concerning coronavirus data.

California health officials said Friday they were seeing hospitalization numbers begin to trend upward, stressing the need for vaccinations and booster vaccines.

In New Jersey, "we're seeing long lines outside of our testing clinic, more demand than we've seen in many months for testing, because folks are getting sick," Dr. Shereef Elnahal, president and CEO of University Hospital in Newark, told CNN's Amara Walker.

Hospitalizations have doubled over the last two weeks, he said, and although 46% of those hospitalized earlier this week had been vaccinated, they had not had a booster shot.

Dr. Rob Davidson, an emergency room physician in Michigan, said he's seeing a "pretty critical Delta surge right now." And while he's seeing the test positivity rate slightly decrease, Covid-19 patients are staying in the hospital for extended periods of time.

Dr. Marc Gorelick, who heads Children's Minnesota hospital, said the facility is already struggling to cope with the numbers.

"When you're on top of a surge where you're already at 90%, 95% capacity, those extra ... preventable Covid patients coming in are the thing that pushes the system to the brink. And that's what we're seeing here in Minnesota," Gorelick told CNN's Kate Bolduan Friday.

In Oregon, officials forecast a grim early 2022.

"We can expect a surge in Oregon hospitalizations by mid-January, with infections that begin sooner than that," said Dr. Peter Graven, a data scientist for Oregon Health and Science University. "Combined with its heightened transmissibility, we expect Omicron will generate a large increase in the number of Oregonians that will become severely ill and likely need a hospital."

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HEADLINE	12/19 Germany: Russia will not dictate to NATO
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-will-not-let-russia-dictate-its-military-posture-germany-says-2021-12-19/
GIST	<p>RUKLA, Lithuania Dec 19 (Reuters) - NATO will discuss Russia's security proposals but it will not let Moscow dictate the alliance's military posture, German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht said on Sunday on a visit to German troops based in Lithuania to deter a Russian attack.</p> <p>On Friday, Moscow set out a list of demands for the West that includes withdrawing NATO battalions from Poland and Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, once part of the Soviet Union.</p> <p>Russia is also demanding a legally binding guarantee that NATO will give up any military activity in Eastern Europe and Ukraine and an effective Russian veto on future NATO membership for Ukraine - which the West has already ruled out.</p> <p>"We need to solve the current tensions on the diplomatic level but just as well by putting up a credible deterrence," Lambrecht told reporters in Rukla on her first visit to German troops abroad.</p>

	<p>The combat units, deployed three years after Moscow's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea in 2014, are meant to stall an assault and buy time for additional NATO troops to arrive at the frontline.</p> <p>"We will discuss Russia's proposals...But it cannot be that Russia dictates to NATO partners their posture, and that is something that we will make very clear in the talks (next week at the NATO council)," she added.</p> <p>The West has threatened harsh economic sanctions on Russia should Moscow escalate its military build-up on Ukraine's border. Moscow says it is only responding to threats to its security from Kyiv's increasingly close relations with NATO.</p> <p>Speaking alongside Lambrecht on Sunday, Lithuania's Defence Minister Arvydas Anusauskas accused Russia of trying to drive a wedge into the alliance, and said NATO must not allow Moscow to divide Europe into spheres of influence.</p> <p>"We need to support Ukraine with all means, which includes the delivery of lethal weapons," Anusauskas added, without giving details on what kind of weapons he meant.</p> <p>Lambrecht declined to comment on a report by Spiegel on Saturday that NATO's top general Tod Wolters had suggested the alliance should establish a similar military presence as in Poland and the Baltic states in Bulgaria and Romania.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Hospitals struggle as Covid beds fill
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-hospitals-struggle-as-covid-beds-fill-5e98f09c578a231be1411516e9dfff58
GIST	<p>DETROIT (AP) — Hospitals across the country are struggling to cope with burnout among doctors, nurses and other workers, already buffeted by a crush of patients from the ongoing surge of the COVID-19 delta variant and now bracing for the fallout of another highly transmissible mutation.</p> <p>Ohio became the latest state to summon the National Guard to help overwhelmed medical facilities. Experts in Nebraska warned that its hospitals soon may need to ration care. Medical officials in Kansas and Missouri are delaying surgeries, turning away transfers and desperately trying to hire traveling nurses, as cases double and triple in an eerie reminder of last year's holiday season.</p> <p>"There is no medical school class that can prepare you for this level of death," said Dr. Jacqueline Pflaum-Carlson, an emergency medicine specialist at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit. "The hits just keep coming."</p> <p>The national seven-day average of COVID-19 hospital admissions was 60,000 by Wednesday, far off last winter's peak but 50% higher than in early November, the government reported. The situation is more acute in cold-weather regions, where people are increasingly gathering inside and new infections are piling up.</p> <p>New York state reported Saturday that slightly more than 21,900 people had tested positive for COVID-19 the day before, a new high since tests became widely available. Consequences of the latest surge have been swift in New York City: The Rockettes Christmas show was scratched for the season; some Broadway shows canceled performances because of outbreaks among cast members; and "Saturday Night Live" announced it was taping without a live audience and with only limited cast and crew.</p> <p>"We are in a situation where we are now facing a very important delta surge and we are looking over our shoulder at an oncoming omicron surge," Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden, said of the two COVID-19 variants.</p>

At AdventHealth Shawnee Mission, a hospital near Kansas City, Missouri, chief medical officer Dr. Lisa Hays said the emergency department is experiencing backups sometimes lasting for days.

“The beds are not the issue. It’s the nurses to staff the beds. ... And it’s all created by rising COVID numbers and burnout,” Hays said. “Our nurses are burnt out.”

Experts attribute most of the rise in cases and hospitalizations to infections among people who have not been inoculated against the coronavirus. The government says [61% of the U.S. population](#) is fully vaccinated.

Dr. Steve Stites, chief medical officer at University of Kansas Health System in Kansas City, Kansas, said the “pandemic of the unvaccinated” continues to swamp the hospital and its workers.

“There’s no place to go. Our staff are tired. We’re going to run out of travelers,” Stites said, referring to visiting health care workers, “and omicron is at our doorstep. This is a tornado warning to our community.”

Ohio’s National Guard deployment is one of the largest seen during the pandemic, with more than 1,000 members sent to beleaguered hospitals especially in the Akron, Canton and Cleveland areas.

As of Friday, 4,723 people in the state were hospitalized with the coronavirus, a number last seen about a year ago, Gov. Mike DeWine said. Some staffers were taking only short breaks before punching in for second shifts, he added.

Health systems elsewhere that are doing somewhat better are nervously eyeing the arrival of the omicron variant and girding themselves for the impact.

Nebraska officials said hospitals might have to put some care on hold to make room for COVID-19 patients. While case numbers are down from the state’s pandemic peak, they could rebound rapidly, and bed availability remains tight because of patients with non-virus ailments.

“It may be likely that omicron will cause a giant surge, and honestly we can’t handle that right now,” said Dr. Angela Hewlett of Nebraska Medicine in Omaha.

At Los Angeles’ Providence Holy Cross Medical Center, just 17 coronavirus patients were being treated there Friday, a small fraction of the hospital’s worst stretch. Nurse manager Edgar Ramirez said his co-workers are weary but better prepared if a wave hits.

“The human factor of having that fear is always going to be there,” Ramirez said. “I tell our crew, ‘We have to talk through this. We have to express ourselves.’ Otherwise it’s going to tough.”

Twin sisters Linda Calderon and Natalie Balli, 71, had planned to get vaccinated but delayed it until it was too late. Now they’re on oxygen in the same room at Providence Holy Cross, their beds separated by just a few feet.

“We kept saying, ‘we’ll do it tomorrow.’ But tomorrow never came,” Calderon said as she watched her sister struggle to breathe. “We really regret not getting the shots, because if we did, we wouldn’t be like this right now.”

Pflaum-Carlson, the doctor at Detroit’s Henry Ford Health, made a public plea for people to get the shots both for their benefit and for those toiling on the frontlines of care. Eighty percent of the roughly 500 COVID-19 patients at the system’s five hospitals were unvaccinated,

“Have a little grace and consideration in how devastating things are right now,” she said.

HEADLINE	12/19 Mass anti-coup protests in Sudan
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/sudanese-plan-anti-coup-protests-uprising-anniversary-81842144
GIST	<p>CAIRO -- Sudanese took to the streets in the capital of Khartoum and elsewhere across the country for mass protests Sunday against an October military takeover and a subsequent deal that reinstated Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok but sidelined the movement.</p> <p>The demonstrations mark the third anniversary of the uprising that eventually forced the military removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government in April 2019.</p> <p>Sudan then followed a fragile path toward democracy and ruled by a joint military-civilian government. The October 25 coup has rattled the transition and led to relentless street protests.</p> <p>Video footage circulated online purported to show protesters marching in the streets of Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman on Sunday. Protesters were seen waving the Sudanese flag and white ones with printed images of those killed in the uprising and ensuing protests.</p> <p>Ahead of the demonstrations, Sudan's authorities tightened security across the capital, barricading government and military buildings to prevent protesters from reaching the military's headquarters and the presidential palace. They also blocked major roads and bridges linking Khartoum and Omdurman across the Nile River.</p> <p>Security forces used tear gas to disperse protesters headed toward the palace on the bank of the Blue Nile in the heart of Khartoum, according to activist Nazim Sirag. There were no immediate reports of casualties.</p> <p>There were also protests in other cities including in Atbara, the birthplace of the uprising against al-Bashir.</p> <p>The protests were called by the pro-democracy movement that led the uprising against al-Bashir and stuck a power-sharing deal with the generals in the months that followed his ouster.</p> <p>Relations between the generals and the civilians in the transitional government were shaky and capped by the military's Oct. 25 takeover that removed Hamdok's government.</p> <p>Hamdok was reinstated last month amid international pressure in a deal that calls for an independent technocratic Cabinet under military oversight led by him. The agreement included the release of government officials and politicians detained since the coup.</p> <p>Talks are underway to agree on what Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling Sovereign Council, described as a "new political charter" focused on establishing a broader consensus among all political forces and movements.</p> <p>Addressing Sudanese late Saturday ahead of the protests, Hamdok said he stuck the Nov. 21 deal with the military mainly to prevent bloodshed. He warned that the country could slide further into chaos amid uphill economic and security challenges.</p> <p>"Today, we are facing a retreat in the path of our revolution that threatens the country's security and integrity," Hamdok said, adding that the agreement was meant to preserve achievements his government made in the past two years, and to "protect our nation from sliding to a new international isolation."</p> <p>"The deal, in my view, is the most effective and inexpensive means to return to the course of civic and democratic transition," he said.</p> <p>Hamdok urged political parties and movements to agree on a "national charter" to complete the democratic transition and achieve peace with rebel groups.</p>

	<p>The pro-democracy movement has meanwhile insisted that power be handed over to a civilian government to lead the transition. Their relentless protests follow the slogan: “No negotiations, no compromise, no power-sharing” with the military.</p> <p>The list of demands also includes restructuring the military and other security agencies under civilian oversight and disbanding militias. One is the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary force that grew out of janjaweed militias and is accused of atrocities during the Darfur conflict and most recently against pro-democracy protesters.</p> <p>The continued protests since the coup have increased pressure on the military and Hamdok, who has yet to announce his Cabinet.</p> <p>Security forces used violence, including firing live ammunition at protesters, in the past round of demonstrations, according to activists. At least 45 people were killed and hundreds wounded in protests triggered by the coup, according to a tally by a Sudanese medical group.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Prediction: illness, death to unvaccinated
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/17/white-house-warns-omicron-will-be-dominant-within/
GIST	<p>The Biden administration said Friday it expects omicron to become the dominant strain of the coronavirus within weeks and predicted the fallout will divide into two paths, causing mild cases among vaccinated-and-boosted Americans while the unvaccinated confront a winter of misery and death.</p> <p>White House COVID-19 Response Coordinator Jeff Zients said the U.S. will not allow the new variant to upend social and business routines despite rising case counts and dire predictions about omicron’s transmissibility.</p> <p>“Unlike last winter, we now have the power to protect ourselves. Our vaccines work against omicron, especially for people who get booster shots when they are eligible,” he said. “We are intent on not letting omicron disrupt work and school for the vaccinated. You’ve done the right thing and we’ll get through this.”</p> <p>However, he repeated the blunt warning President Biden levied at the unvaccinated a day earlier.</p> <p>“If you’re unvaccinated, you’re looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm,” Mr. Zients said, reiterating the call for primary vaccination, getting boosted when eligible and masking in public indoor spaces in areas of high transmission. “Our message to every American is clear. There is action you can take to protect yourself and your family.”</p> <p>Countries around the world are seeing a proliferation of infections amid the onset of winter and the global spread omicron variant that was first detected in South Africa in late November.</p> <p>“We expect it to become the dominant strain in the U.S. as it has in other countries, in the coming weeks,” said Rochelle Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>Officials said omicron is clearly highly transmissible, but the jury is out on whether it is more severe. Reports of milder illness might be due to the fact people who caught omicron in early reports had been vaccinated or enjoyed some immunity from prior infection.</p> <p>Dr. Walensky said families should wear masks in public to avoid getting infected before they gather with friends and families for Christmas. She also said it would be wise to take a rapid test immediately before a gathering.</p>

	<p>Dr. Walensky spoke one day after she endorsed an advisory panel's decision to declare messenger-RNA vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna as preferable to the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, citing concerns around a rare blood-clotting issue linked to the J&J shots.</p> <p>She said the J&J vaccine will still be available to those who want it.</p> <p>"Any vaccination is better than no vaccination," Dr. Walensky said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 UK police, anti-lockdown protesters in clash
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/18/uk-police-clash-anti-lockdown-protesters-over-covi/
GIST	<p>Thousands of protesters in London clashed with police, as demonstrators on Saturday took to the streets to oppose COVID restrictions.</p> <p>The crowd took part in a "Freedom Rally" near Downing Street which voiced opposition against vaccine passports and other pandemic related rules and restrictions.</p> <p>Videos of the rally posted to social media show protesters holding signs that read "This is Tyranny" and "Freedom Over Fear." Few demonstrators had Trump 2024 flags.</p> <p>Protesters who clashed with police shouted, "shame on you" to officers, reports Sky News.</p> <p>Some officers suffered minor injuries, according to London's Metropolitan Police.</p> <p>Some demonstrators reportedly had also rammed a local shop by throwing eggs at the building and harassing customers inside.</p> <p>A banner was also placed on a statue of Winston Churchill that reads "I'm not your patient, you can keep your f*****g needle."</p> <p>The demonstration follows reports that Prime Minister Boris Johnson had attended Christmas parties last year at a time when Britons were forced to face strict lockdown measures.</p> <p>Mr. Johnson is considering imposing new restrictions, as the country deals with a COVID spike related to the omicron variant.</p> <p>The U.K. has had some of the harshest lockdown measures to mitigate the pandemic.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron, holidays scramble for virus tests
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/18/omicron-covid-tests/
GIST	<p>Coronavirus testing was a breeze when J.D. Schroeder traveled to Abu Dhabi and Mexico this fall. Not so much at home in Pennsylvania when he felt sick Wednesday and found out he had been exposed.</p> <p>The mechanical engineer started looking for an over-the-counter rapid test because the earliest antigen test appointment he could find in his Pittsburgh-area community was almost a week away. Rite Aid would only let him order online. The closest CVS pharmacies were all out of stock. He nabbed the last box at a Walgreens, which came back positive.</p> <p>When he traveled to the United Arab Emirates for work last month, he paid roughly \$13 for lab tests and got results within two hours. A hotel in Mexico where he vacationed over Thanksgiving had ample rapid testing kits for guests.</p>

“I’m 31 and I’m pretty tech savvy. I can’t imagine someone who doesn’t have access to a computer or isn’t comfortable searching different places to figure this stuff out because it can be confusing,” said Schroeder, who is now quarantining at home.

Easy access to [coronavirus tests](#) — both rapid at-home kits and PCR tests analyzed in labs — is uneven across the United States as the nation faces the prospect of explosive outbreaks linked to [holiday travel](#) and the highly transmissible omicron variant, connected to sharp surges in cases globally. Government officials and public health experts have urged Americans to get tested before they attend big events like [holiday parties](#) and gather for Christmas. It’s a way to break chains of transmission by nipping outbreaks at the bud, especially in places [declining to reinstate mask mandates](#) or social distancing measures.

But some Americans trying to be good pandemic citizens are having a hard time finding tests. Some are turning to Facebook or group chats for leads on which stores still have rapid tests in stock. Some are waiting in their cars for hours for PCR tests. New York City, again emerging as an epicenter with infections skyrocketing, announced plans Thursday to [distribute 500,000 at-home tests](#) and expand testing sites as residents report waiting in line for hours to get tested.

Others may decide the hunt is not worth the hassle.

Because the testing system is decentralized and spread out across public and private labs, clinics and providers, there’s no clear systemic data on the availability of testing. But health officials and experts say capacity is a problem as demand surges. Daily testing is averaging above 1.5 million a day for the first time since October, according to the [Johns Hopkins University tracking](#).

The vast majority of states and counties report nearly all people tested in their community are still receiving results within three days, according to federal data. But that data doesn’t capture those who attempted to find tests and gave up.

Challenges accessing testing are not insurmountable, and Americans can generally find a rapid or PCR test combing through various public and private institutions offering them.

Public health experts warn each hurdle, from the price tag of a rapid test to a several day wait for a PCR test, makes it harder to battle a winter surge. A person with the sniffles who forgoes a rapid test because it’s too expensive could end up spreading to others at a [holiday party](#). A college student who tried to find a kit at three pharmacies before giving up could end up infecting a grandmother with a weak [immune system](#) at Christmas.

“Testing shouldn’t be just the gold ring at the end of an obstacle course,” said Adriane Casalotti, chief of public and government affairs at the National Association of County and City Health Officials. “It should be easily accessible, it should be something that doesn’t burden or take too much out of your day because that’s the only way it becomes routine.”

Casalotti said testing capacity is under major strain as exposures to positive cases grow, schools, workplaces and travel destinations require proof of negative test results, and government agencies recommend testing before holiday gatherings. Local public health officials often have to decide whether to use their limited staff and resources on shoring up vaccine sites or testing sites, she said.

The Biden administration has taken steps to increase the availability of rapid testing, including streamlining the review process to authorize kits, and ensuring supply of about 200 million for December. But critics say the U.S. has still failed to make tests as readily accessible as they are in other countries such as the United Kingdom and Singapore. President Biden also moved to require insurers reimburse rapid test kit purchases, which typically run about \$25 for two tests. But it will not take effect until after the holidays and places the burden on the consumer.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki dismissed a question about sending free testing kits to households as costly earlier this month, although several states are already doing so.

Colorado has distributed nearly 1.3 million free rapid tests to about 180,000 residents this year, making them widely available in late September. Residents can place an order online for up to four tests, twice a week.

Justin McCammon, a 36-year-old software engineer in the Boulder, Colo., area, already made rapid tests a staple of pandemic life since he and his wife started buying them at Walmart in August and using them weekly after sending their toddler to day care. When Colorado started free shipments, he would request them weekly online to save money.

McCammon and his wife used rapid tests after attending concerts in October. His wife used one after returning from a trip to San Francisco over Thanksgiving.

When he started feeling [cold-like symptoms](#) this week, he quickly got negative test results using the rapid kits. They have even more on hand for when his relatives start flying in for Christmas over the weekend.

“It’s just part of our routine, and it’s just what we do and it gives us a little bit of peace of mind,” McCammon said in a phone interview while in his car undergoing a PCR test to confirm the results. “Especially after a year plus of having so much anxiety around everything covid related, and the ebbs and flows and the waves — and any little snuffle you get making you wonder, ‘Oh my God, is this it?’ ”

Free test giveaways have not been a panacea for testing problems.

New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu (R) touted his administration’s efforts to make rapid tests available for online order in late November as his state battles one of the nation’s worst coronavirus surges. But the supply ran out within 24 hours. State health officials did not immediately return requests for comment on whether they would offer more.

Customers are instead turning to retail stores where kits sell out quickly after arriving and access is spotty. After unsuccessfully trying three pharmacies in West Lebanon, N.H., Kathy Brice found a Flowflex Antigen Home Test on display near the pharmacy section of a CVS about a 10-minute drive north in Hanover. Brice, 72, wanted the negative test result before visiting her 4-year-old granddaughter, who is [too young to be vaccinated](#).

“I’ve taken all the [boosters](#), all the shots, but I traveled to the Virgin Islands for the birth of my granddaughter and then Naples [Fla.] to see friends,” said Brice, who lives just over the border in Vermont.

One of the CVS stores where Brice struck out in the morning received a new shipment later in the day. They were kept out of view by the cash register and limited to one per customer. Rachael Ringenberg of Bridgewater, Vt., left with a box in hand after asking the cashier if they had any in stock.

She described rapid tests as the ticket to a semi-normal life in Vermont, which has been reeling from a [recent surge](#) despite being the most vaccinated and boosted state in the country.

“I have four kids and it’s starting to feel like if you have the test, then you can do stuff,” said Ringenberg, 37. “People are asking to do it before they meet up. I’m going to go to a play tonight and they want to see the negative tests before that for the kids because they’re not vaccinated yet.”

Her children all tested negative in time to marvel at the fake snow and beautiful costumes in an evening performance of “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.”

Rapid tests are not always accepted as a proof of a negative test result for travel, school or events, leaving some people jostling to find PCR appointments.

Chris Patterson called a local pharmacy in his Hudson River valley community and was quoted \$150 each for a PCR test after his two daughters developed cold symptoms and couldn't go to school as cases surged in New York. The closest site that accepted insurance was 25 miles away at an old drive-through bank in a strip mall. He waited more than an hour and said staff told him they were surprised by how many people showed up.

They tested negative and were able to return to school the next day. But Patterson was surprised at the obstacles along the way and is on guard for insurance denying his claims.

"We are trying to do everything right by getting tested to know we are not spreading the virus and so we can have a normal holiday," said Patterson, 39. "We were hoping to have a little more sense of normalcy this year, but it just seems fleeting with the uptick in cases and it's a financial burden to get tested, so you feel like you are penalized for doing the right thing."

Patterson noted he was fortunate to be in a position to step aside from his finance job for several hours on short notice. Experts said many people will not go out of their ways to get tested, especially if they lack flexibility with their jobs or have [child-care obligations](#).

Michael Mina, chief science officer of eMed and a former public health professor at Harvard University, has criticized the Biden administration for not taking more steps to authorize rapid test kits that have been used extensively abroad and expand the nation's supply.

"We are still blind," Mina said. "Another unfortunate consequence is the people who are most blind are the people who are most at risk, who are already disenfranchised and poor and can't take time out of their work schedule to just go and take three hours of their day just because they woke up with a scratchy throat. Those people are going to wait until they are coughing. By that point, the virus has already tore through their lungs."

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HEADLINE	12/18 Restaurants closing as staff test positive
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/food/2021/12/18/restaurant-closures-coronavirus-omicron/
GIST	<p>Late last month, Dean Rodrigue, the owner of the Sawmill Bar and Grill in Millinocket, Maine, thought he had notched a small win. After months of posting "Help Wanted" signs, he had finally hired a bartender to mix drinks and pour beers, bringing his total employee pool at the casual eatery to eight.</p> <p>Use our Holiday Cookie Generator and find 359 recipes to fit every taste, craving and occasion</p> <p>The woman he hired worked a four-hour shift one Saturday, but before she was due to return the following Thursday, he got a message: She had tested positive for the coronavirus. Rodrigue did what he felt he had to and shut the place down.</p> <p>"It was an easy decision to make," he said. "But it was not a great decision to have to make." It wasn't just an ordinary weekend — it fell during the former mill town's annual marathon, when thousands of runners and their friends and family pour into town. Rodrigue had been counting on the booming business the event typically brings in to tide him over. The restaurant had been losing money every week, he said, and they were in thick of the dreaded "shoulder season," the dead zone between the warm-weather tourist season when hikers flock to the nearby parks and trails, and snowmobile season.</p> <p>After the restaurant closed, Rodrigue and his girlfriend, who also works at the restaurant, and a chef — all of whom had been feeling a little under the weather — got tested. They were negative, and so he reopened the following weekend, figuring it had been more than a week and a half since the bartender who had tested positive had worked there.</p> <p>Rodrigue isn't the only restaurant owner navigating the uncertainty and financial toll that come with a positive coronavirus test or possible exposure among its staff. Around the country, bars and restaurants are</p>

shuttering and reopening as covid cases and deaths are on the rise and as [the omicron variant spreads](#). For many restaurant owners, this is not just about business. It's about their responsibilities to staff and the public health, and some say they don't have a reliable road map for the omicron variant, which appears to be more contagious than previous strains of the novel coronavirus and more likely to evade vaccine protections.

It's not just restaurants feeling the new wave of covid disruption. About a hundred professional football players' positive tests have led to the [postponement of several NFL games](#). Some colleges around the country are [sending students home](#) and making final exams virtual. And outbreaks have led to the cancellation of concerts and [shows](#) from [Broadway](#) to the Kennedy Center.

On Thursday, Alex McCoy, the chef and owner of Washington's Lucky Buns, got a call from a diner who had just tested positive for the coronavirus. The customer, McCoy said, had dined at his burger joint in the Adams Morgan neighborhood Dec. 10.

Later that day, Lucky Buns operation manager Andy Plunket took the entire staff to a walk-in clinic for rapid-response tests. McCoy ordered the Adams Morgan location closed for the night "out of an abundance of caution," as the owners wrote on Instagram.

Similar notices have popped up on social media in recent days as restaurants in [Texas](#), [Minnesota](#), [Indiana](#) and [New York](#) notified their customers of closures related to positive tests and potential covid exposures. In New York City alone — where restaurant workers and diners are required to provide proof of vaccination — [running lists](#) of restaurants closed due to covid cases in the double digits.

Some restaurants are choosing to close temporarily even before a positive test from a worker or a diner. Maketto, a Washington restaurant dedicated to modern Cambodian and Taiwanese cooking, preemptively canceled indoor dining until 2022. "Out of an abundance of caution to our staff and guests, we will be offering to-go only for the rest of the year," chef and owner Erik Bruner-Yang [wrote on Instagram](#). Bruner-Yang said he was in the middle of canceling dozens of reservations and couldn't comment any further on the announcement.

This week, an employee at Bar Charley in Washington came down with covid, and owner Jackie Greenbaum immediately closed her place, even though it was a Saturday. After the staff scheduled for the following day tested negative, Bar Charley reopened, only to have another employee turn out positive later. That's when Greenbaum decided to shut down her restaurant for five days so every employee could take a PCR test, the gold standard for determining if someone has the coronavirus. All of her employees were vaccinated, she noted.

Greenbaum said she will be paying her staff during the closure, including server tips. Between the payroll costs and the loss of revenue, she said she'll lose tens of thousands of dollars.

"For our operations, specifically during the holiday period, we were and our staff is very nervous about knowing whether they are infected or not, particularly knowing that they're going to see their families," said Greenbaum who also co-owns El Chucho, Little Coco's and Quarry House Tavern. "This time of year, there's a heightened anxiety about it and a responsibility that you have to face."

University of Illinois epidemiologist Katrine Wallace said it's not yet known whether the spate of restaurant staff testing positive is linked to the spread of the omicron variant. But she noted that throughout the pandemic, restaurant workers have always been among the most vulnerable workers. It's impossible for them to socially distance from customers they're serving or from fellow kitchen staff, she said, and they work indoors, where the risk of transmission is higher.

"It's just unavoidable that they have frequent contact with unvaccinated and unmasked people," she said. "Even if a waiter is wearing a mask, there still could be virus flying around, since masks work primarily as source control."

Restaurant owners say it's falling to them to navigate their response when someone gets sick.

Last year, when many states and localities issued emergency orders aimed at limiting the spread of the coronavirus, including social distancing mandates and limits on restaurant capacity, they also imposed protocols for what an establishment should do if a worker tested positive. Many of those rules have since been suspended, although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [recommends](#) that restaurant managers send sick workers home and notify health officials and the rest of their staff of any cases of the coronavirus.

CDC guidance also suggests that those exposed to someone who tests positive get tested within three to five days and wear a mask in "public indoor settings for 14 days after exposure or until a negative test result."

Fortunately for the Lucky Buns crew, all 13 workers tested negative, McCoy said, and he planned to reopen the restaurant on Friday. All of the Lucky Buns staff, McCoy added, were vaccinated, and they're required to wear masks. But between the lost revenue and the cost of tests, McCoy said his establishment was out about \$10,000, a sizable sum during an already difficult economic stretch.

"I have a responsibility to the health and well-being of my staff and their safety, their mental safety," McCoy said. "It's not just about a positive or negative test. It's also about making sure that they're in the right mind-set and they understand that they're safe and they're taken care of. They're going to be protected."

Not that there's ever a good time for a potential outbreak, but for many restaurants, having a staffer test positive now comes at a time when restaurants are already strained. Hikes in food costs might mean they are adjusting their menus or raising prices, supply chain problems can cause uncertainty, and a nationwide labor shortage means many businesses are operating short-staffed or cutting their hours.

"The last few months have been difficult and chaotic for the restaurant industry," said Sean Kennedy, the executive vice president of public affairs for the National Restaurant Association (NRA). "In a recent survey, more than one-third of operators told us that their business conditions — from supply chain challenges to the new covid variant — have worsened for them."

Kennedy said that without additional relief from Congress, some of the temporarily closed restaurants plan to shut their doors for good. Both the [NRA](#) and the [Independent Restaurant Coalition](#) (IRC) are urging Congress to replenish the Restaurant Revitalization Fund. The IRC is predicting widespread restaurant closures if Congress doesn't act.

In the meantime, restaurateurs are concerned about what the recent outbreaks and closures signal. Like Greenbaum, whose restaurants have had only one previous outbreak among staff, and that was very early in the pandemic at Quarry House, a subterranean pub.

"I am suspicious that it's the new variant only because we have been very careful and, I think, really responsible," Greenbaum said. "My employees have been very, very careful. I don't have a staff anywhere that is taking it lightly."

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HEADLINE	12/19 Omicron fuels tighter, looser restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/19/omicron-coronavirus-restrictions-netherlands-australia/
GIST	As some nations reimpose tough measures, including lockdowns, to curb infections spurred by the highly transmissible new omicron coronavirus variant, others are going the other way and loosening up even as case numbers spike.

The Netherlands imposed a snap lockdown starting Sunday. France banned New Year's Eve fireworks. Officials in Ireland imposed a nightly curfew from Monday, requiring pubs, restaurants, theaters and cinemas to close by 8 p.m. Several European countries including France and Germany imposed new travel restrictions.

Meanwhile, in Australia – once dubbed the “[Hermit Kingdom](#)” for the way it sealed its international borders against the virus – officials in the country's most populous areas have loosened nearly all restrictions in recent days, despite case numbers soaring to fresh records.

New Zealand, too, has been loosening restrictions aimed at tackling an outbreak of the delta variant after hitting the 90 percent vaccination mark this month. Thanks to that change, the country's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, is set to celebrate her pandemic-delayed wedding next month with dozens of guests, and a performance by singer Lorde, the [New Zealand Herald](#) reported.

In Australia, which reopened its mostly shut border in November, experts have questioned the merits of ending preventative measures such as mask-wearing indoors just as case numbers are touching local records. The last time restrictions were eased, the borders were closed to international arrivals and the virus had been all but eliminated in the community.

Even as some community restrictions lift in New Zealand, its border remains mostly closed, and international arrivals spend two weeks in hotel quarantine, which has kept the number of confirmed cases of the omicron variant to about a dozen, all detected before they could spread.

Health officials in Australia's New South Wales state, home to Sydney, lifted a raft of restrictions Dec. 15, including those around masks-wearing and proof of vaccination. Until then, unvaccinated people had effectively been in lockdown – unable to dine out, go to the gym or shop for anything other than essential groceries.

That's as at least 97 coronavirus cases were linked to a [Taylor Swift-themed dance party](#) on Dec. 10 in Sydney, and some 600 are in isolation as close contacts. More than 200 people contracted the virus following a recent [nightclub outbreak](#) in Newcastle.

Disease modelers say Australia's most populous state could record as many as 25,000 cases a day by the end of January – the same number recorded across Britain on Friday, where surging case numbers have seen London's mayor declare a “major incident” to help the city's hospitals cope. Australian officials have cited the data from researchers as a reason for people to exercise self-restraint, limiting their activities over the holiday season.

The president of the Australian Medical Association, Omar Khorshid, said Saturday that loosening restrictions such as mask wearing while cases are rising sharply is “bizarre timing.” More than 10,000 people have contracted the virus in New South Wales in the past five days.

“Hospitalizations lag behind infections quite significantly by a week or even two weeks; it's too late once we actually see a sharp rise in hospitalizations,” Khorshid said.

Government officials have argued vaccinations and boosters are the way to keep cases down. About 77 percent of Australians are fully vaccinated, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

“We're ready for this. We planned to live with the virus, we didn't plan to remain shut in,” Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told reporters on Saturday.

The World Health Organization issued a grim weekend prediction that with cases rising so rapidly, hospitals in many places could “become quickly overwhelmed.” The omicron variant has been reported in 89 countries, and the number of cases is [doubling in 1 1/2 to three days](#) in areas with community transmission, the organization said Saturday.

The United States has responded by introducing travel bans for a number of African countries, and introduced additional pre-departure testing requirements for arrivals into the country, as well as encouraging Americans to get booster shots.

Across Europe, where omicron is poised to become the dominant variant, nations are moving to reimpose tougher measures to stem infections as the new variant spreads at lightning speed across the continent. In the Netherlands, Prime Minister Mark Rutte said that all non-essential stores, bars and restaurants will be closed until Jan. 14, starting Sunday. Schools and universities will shut until Jan. 9.

France announced Thursday it was banning tourists from Britain, while Germany said Saturday it will impose quarantine on all travelers from Britain starting midnight on Monday and require a negative coronavirus test for entry into the country.

Britain has re-imposed mask requirements indoors and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a recent negative coronavirus test when going to nightclubs and large events. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has talked about a “tidal wave” of new cases.

Officials are reportedly preparing draft rules that, if introduced, would ban indoor gatherings in England for two weeks after Christmas, with pubs and restaurants limited to outdoor table service, according to The Times newspaper.

Scientists say many questions about omicron remain unanswered, including how effective existing vaccines are against it and whether it causes more or less severe illness. Their concern is that even in places like Australia or [Denmark](#), a highly vaccinated, wealthy northern European country, the virus is about to sprint out of control.

“The right thing to do right now is try and flatten that curve a little bit, because we don’t know what proportion of people who get omicron are going to end up in hospital,” said the Australian Medical Association’s Khorshid. “It seems more mild, but if you end up with tens of thousands of people every day getting infected ... even if a small proportion end up in hospital, that could still overwhelm the system.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 Denmark: warnings about what to expect
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/18/omicron-variant-denmark/
GIST	<p>COPENHAGEN — In a country that tracks the spread of coronavirus variants as closely as any in the world, the signals have never been more concerning. Omicron positives are doubling nearly every two days. The country is setting one daily case record after another. The lab analyzing positive tests recently added an overnight shift just to keep up.</p> <p>And scientists say the surge is just beginning.</p> <p>As omicron drives a new phase of the pandemic, many are looking to Denmark — and particularly the government institute devoted to testing, surveillance and modeling — for warnings about what to expect.</p> <p>The emerging answer — even in this highly vaccinated, wealthy northern European country — is dire. For all the defenses built over the last year, the virus is about to sprint out of control, and scientists here expect a similar pattern in much of the world.</p> <p>“The next month will be the hardest period of the pandemic,” said Tyra Grove Krause, the chief epidemiologist at Denmark’s State Serum Institute, a campus of brick buildings along a canal.</p> <p>Ever since the omicron variant emerged in November, the best hope has been that it might cause less severe sickness than the delta version it is competing with, which in turn might make this wave more manageable and help the transition of covid-19 into an endemic disease. But Denmark’s projections show the wave so fully inundating the country that even a lessened strain will deliver an unprecedented blow.</p>

Scientists caution that the knowledge of omicron remains imprecise. Denmark's virus modelers have many scenarios. But even in a middle-of-the-road scenario, Danish hospitals will soon face a daily flow of patients several times beyond what they've previously seen.

"This will overwhelm hospitals," Grove Krause said. "I don't have any doubt about it."

In her office building, where she works with a six-person modeling team, she tried to explain why omicron amounts to such a setback in the fight against the pandemic. She likened the virus to a flood, and she described how vaccines, under earlier variants, had acted like two barrier walls safeguarding the health system. One barrier resulted from the vaccines' ability to reduce the probability of infection, keeping spread low. The other barrier stemmed from the diminished likelihood of severe sickness and death. Both barriers had some holes, but together, they ensured that the floodwaters never got too high.

But now, she said, the first barrier has been largely removed. Denmark's data shows people with two doses to be just as vulnerable to omicron infection as the unvaccinated. Those who've received boosters have better protection — a sign of hope — but meanwhile, about 3 in 4 Danes have yet to receive a third dose, making the majority of the country vulnerable.

That dynamic, coupled with a variant far more transmissible than the one from last winter, means any Danish person is now dramatically more likely to come in contact with the virus — including the old and the frail, as Denmark's demographics skew older, like much of the West. The water will now flow through the holes in the second wall.

On her double-monitor computer, Grove Krause pulled up the institute's latest projections, which scientists were still tweaking before releasing them to the public on Saturday. The range of possibilities is wide, but the very best scenario — which is unlikely, she said — shows daily hospitalizations matching the peak of last year. In most of the other scenarios, the numbers soar into the stratosphere.

Denmark's hospitals have never had more than 1,000 covid 19 patients at any given time, last winter's peak. But by early January, in a moderate scenario, hospitals could be seeing 500 new covid patients arriving every day. If omicron's transmissibility winds up on the higher end, and it proves just as severe as the delta variant, with a strong ability to evade vaccines, daily admissions could reach 800.

And then there is the matter of infections. Before this wave, Denmark had never seen more than 5,000 cases in a day. On Friday, it logged more than 11,000 new cases. Within a week, in a moderate scenario, case numbers could hit 27,000. And into January? The institute's estimates climb higher still, off the Y-axis.

With the surge coming into view, Denmark this month cut the opening hours for bars and restaurants, urged people to work from home, and closed schools seven days earlier than planned for Christmas break. Grove Krause cautioned that the projections didn't take into account the government's further moves announced Friday, which include the closure of cinemas and theaters. But even a full lockdown, she said, "won't stop this from getting out of control."

Denmark's projections are taken seriously around the world, because they are informed by an all-encompassing coronavirus surveillance system designed specifically for moments like this — when the nature of the virus is quickly shifting.

The system starts with testing: Denmark swabs more people than almost any other country — at a per capita pace seven times that of the United States. The tests, which are free for both citizens and travelers, then arrive at the State Serum Institute, as well as at a sister facility on the other side of the country. Lab technicians identify the positives within 24 hours. And by the following day, they know which variant is responsible for every case.

A portion of the positives are then fully genetically sequenced, delivering an extra layer of insight — allowing researchers not only to see mutations, but also to potentially understand who infected whom.

“We’re seeing things pretty much in real time,” said Arie Cohen, head of development at the lab that processes test results and conducts the initial variant analysis.

What that data has shown, so far, is that the hospitalization rate is slightly lower for omicron than it is for delta — though because hospitalizations lag behind infections, and because omicron infections hit only recently, scientists say the results will be more meaningful in a couple of weeks.

Scientists have also identified how omicron was seeded throughout the country, first from travelers inbound from Africa, and then through several superspreader events. A just-published paper from the institute and other researchers described a Christmas party attended by about 150 people. Most were vaccinated. And yet 71 tested positive for omicron.

Initial omicron cases in Denmark have been concentrated disproportionately among people in their 20s — an age group that normally has mild symptoms, and whose infections might be missed by countries that test less. Some scientists at the institute think Denmark’s wave is a week or two ahead of other Western countries. But others say many countries could already be experiencing the same pattern, with the young — who are most likely to travel and socialize — jump-starting community spread.

“There’s a chance that Denmark is capturing the spread that other countries are missing,” said Marc Stegger, whose team analyzes genomic data.

New swabs arrive at this lab 21 times a day, from morning until 2 a.m. Within 48 hours of every test, Denmark knows whether a positive is attributable to omicron. (Chico Harlan/The Washington Post) Scientists here say granular research only makes sense if the knowledge provides a way to safeguard the country — and it has in the past. A year ago, when the alpha variant was taking hold, Denmark quickly tightened its lockdown, significantly blunting the wave.

The government hasn’t implemented a comprehensive lockdown this time. But it has tried to be responsive to the emerging science. Still, the spread has continued apace. For early omicron cases, Denmark tried to quarantine not just close contacts, but contacts of contacts; the strategy was abandoned after nine days because it became untenable.

At the State Serum Institute, many scientists talk wearily about the pre-omicron days as if reflecting on another era, back when the pandemic was manageable and understandable. In the past several weeks alone, the testing lab has hired 100 new people. It bought 20 new PCR machines. It started dipping into its reserve stockpile of plastic lab parts and competing with other countries for supplies. The institute’s Christmas party, planned for last week, was canceled.

Scientists say they feel trepidation — and also a bit of awe — about what they are seeing: an incredibly fit virus, winning a turf war against delta. As of Monday — the most recent day with complete, publicly released data — omicron accounted for 26.8 percent of cases. A week earlier, omicron’s share had been 4.9 percent.

“It’s moving so fast,” Cohen said, as more swabs arrived at the lab below his second-floor office. He said his chief concern was to keep things running. He called himself a “lab guy,” and said thinking about the bigger picture was for the epidemiologists. But he ventured: “I can’t help but have a fatalistic opinion: that we’re all going to get this.”

For the moment, the full consequences of the omicron variant are still on the horizon — weeks away, on a computer screen, or part of government warnings. In Britain, the only country that can match Denmark’s variant surveillance, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has talked about a “tidal wave” of incoming cases. The variant is already dominant in London, and Europe’s center for disease control says it is likely to become

dominant on the continent as a whole in January or February. The United States, too, is bracing for a big wave and swamped hospitals as early as next month.

But the models project only a few weeks into the future, and what lies beyond — after the omicron wave crests and dissipates — is left to the scientific imagination.

At the State Serum Institute, the man with the imagination is Anders Fomsgaard, one of Denmark's best-known virologists. He's a saxophone enthusiast with curly hair. His colleagues call him an idea man. And he works in a squat yellow building where researchers are growing omicron cultures.

He greeted a visitor at the entrance, under neon lights shaped like geometrical fragments, which he explained represent HIV.

"Another epidemic," he said. "Still going on, by the way."

Perhaps, he said, omicron's origins are connected to HIV, as the virus could have come from an immunocompromised person whose body couldn't kill off the virus, which was able to grow and change. Even in Danish hospitals, he said, there are people who have had the coronavirus for seven or eight months. In Denmark, the changes are being monitored; in most places, they are not.

"This could be one of the ways you create this resistant virus," he said.

His goal, he said, is to help humanity finally get ahead of the coronavirus. And to that end, he's leading all sorts of experiments. Among them is research on a vaccine that targets T cells. Such a vaccine wouldn't protect against infection, but its goal would be to stop sickness. The advantage would be that it targets parts of the coronavirus that don't seem to mutate.

"We are all the time responding," he said. "We're behind. We are five steps behind."

He thinks the next month will be brutal, but after that? It's hard to say. Infected people, and there will be many, could come away with a deepened protection — pushing the coronavirus into something less menacing. But he also said the virus is impossible to eradicate fully. Maybe it could jump into rodents. Then maybe back into humans, re-formed. He described the coronavirus as a "master mutator," and clearly, with vaccination, humans are driving the virus into a corner, where it can either weaken or change.

"It could come out on the other end even weaker," Fomsgaard said. "But that is risky business. It might hit another jackpot mutation."

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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron puts pressure Beijing Olympics
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-beijing-olympics-approach-omicron-heightens-pressure-on-vaccines-11639839507?mod=hp_listb_pos4
GIST	<p>The rapid spread of the coronavirus's Omicron variant is coming in the crucial final run-up to February's Winter Olympics in Beijing, prompting organizers to ratchet up their advice about securing a booster dose of vaccine before coming.</p> <p>Beijing 2022 organizers said this week in an updated playbook of Covid protocols that they are advising, but not requiring, participants to get the booster dose.</p> <p>"While we strongly encourage Games participants to receive a booster shot, any requirement to have one is according to the requirement of the participant's country/region of residence or national health authority where the vaccine was administered," the playbook said.</p> <p>The rising Covid case count is suddenly adding additional complexity to planning for Beijing 2022, which is now just weeks away.</p>

The U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee, which is expected to send one of the largest delegations to the Winter Olympics, said Friday it was encouraging booster shots for Team USA. Chief executive Sarah Hirshland said that it was stopping short of a mandate “at this point” in part because some athletes had only recently received their initial vaccinations, making it too soon for them to be eligible for boosting. The U.S. had earlier in the fall required vaccination for participants weeks [ahead of Beijing effectively requiring it](#).

A spokesman for the International Olympic Committee referred to the Covid playbooks for Beijing and added: “Pre-departure testing, the vaccination policy, a ‘closed loop’ management system and regular on-site testing are among the vital elements that will enable the Games to take place safely.”

Some epidemiologists have said a booster shot is the best available line of defense against the Omicron variant, which appears to be more transmissible and capable of infecting people even if they have been vaccinated against Covid.

The next phase of the pandemic is rapidly becoming reality in the United States, where almost three quarters of the population has received at least one vaccine dose from [Pfizer](#), Moderna or [Johnson & Johnson](#), but only about one quarter of fully vaccinated people has received a booster shot. The question is when it will hit China.

And with [border closures in Asia](#), [Christmas on hold in much of Europe](#) and a [wave of cancellations spreading across North America](#), some kind of disruption to the Games suddenly feels more possible than it has at any point in the past year.

China’s [no-tolerance approach to the virus, dubbed “Covid zero,”](#) had already spurred a tough stance from organizers on vaccination in which most athletes, officials and reporters going to the Games will need to show they have their shots or plan for a 21-day quarantine on arrival.

Beijing 2022 organizers had also previously said they would confine the Games and all participants to a “closed loop” from the moment of arrival until the moment of departure – effectively shutting them off from any interactions with the Chinese population – and bar international spectators.

But the Omicron variant’s capacity to be quickly transmitted even among people who have been vaccinated against the coronavirus has reintroduced a new element of uncertainty to major events across the world – particularly in places where officials have indicated they will not accept unchecked spread of the virus.

China also may be uniquely vulnerable to the Omicron variant given its pandemic strategy and its preferred vaccine. The first study of blood samples from people who had received two doses of the Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac’s vaccine suggested that it would be ineffective at preventing infection from the Omicron variant.

The variant’s capacity to break through Covid vaccines’ protection against moderate and severe illness has not yet been fully determined, although early indications have suggested that most vaccinated people are not getting sick from the virus even if they are testing positive for it.

That has sparked some increased risk tolerance in American professional sports hard-hit this week by breakthrough infections such as the National Football League. The NFL said Thursday it would step up measures to prevent the transmission of the virus but let fully vaccinated players who do test positive but have no symptoms return quickly to the field.

Still, Beijing organizers have shown no sign that they will back down from a strict policy of testing every Games participant daily for the virus, with a positive result potentially leading to a person entering weekslong quarantine.

	<p>That could unlock new fears for some countries and their national Olympic committees. In the U.S., lawmakers critical of China had already warned that they did not believe American athletes would be safe at the Beijing Olympics, even without taking into account the quarantine possibility.</p> <p>Those claims exploded after fears for the safety of Chinese tennis player and Olympian Peng Shuai in the wake of an allegation that appeared on Peng's verified account on the Twitter -like platform Weibo that a retired top official in China's Communist Party had sexually assaulted her. Some politicians have argued that poor treatment of a revered Chinese athlete bodes even worse for Americans. USOPC officials did not comment on those concerns in the context of a potential quarantine Friday.</p> <p>Not all countries have such fears, though, including Norway, which topped the unofficial medal table of the last Winter Olympics. Tore Øvrebø, the chef de mission for Team Norway, said in written answers to The Wall Street Journal that "the risk of getting infected will be there, but we trust in the Chinese authorities and the organizers' handling of the situation."</p> <p>Øvrebø also said that he was not sure the Norwegians would pursue booster shots.</p> <p>"A number of athletes got their second dose of vaccine less than five months ago, so for a group of athletes there will be limited time for the third, the booster. Reports say you may have reduced performance level after [a] vaccine, so this must be taken into consideration."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Behind omicron's rapid spread
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-science-behind-omicrons-rapid-spread-11639823405?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos5
GIST	<p>As Omicron has rapidly taken over as the dominant variant of the coronavirus in South Africa and the U.K., scientists are beginning to piece together what gives it its evolutionary advantage.</p> <p>Researchers are still refining and augmenting their findings, but Omicron's heightened transmissibility appears to be a combination of several properties: It seems able to more easily bind to and break into human respiratory cells; it appears to replicate faster once within our bodies; and it can substantially evade the immunity gained from past infection or vaccination.</p> <p>These advantages mean Omicron is spreading across the world at a breakneck pace. Since scientists in South Africa first flagged its presence last month, it has been detected in 77 countries and is probably present in most others, according to the World Health Organization.</p> <p>Omicron cases have been detected in the U.S., throughout Europe and Africa, and in China, which maintains strict border controls and a tough regime for managing even tiny outbreaks.</p> <p>"Omicron is spreading at a rate that we have not seen with any previous variant," WHO Secretary-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said recently.</p> <p>There are signs the variant is associated with less severe disease than earlier versions of the virus. Scientists caution, though, that severity may vary from place to place depending on factors including levels of immunity and population characteristics, and that even if it isn't as dangerous, its ease of transmission means Omicron could still cause waves of sickness and death.</p> <p>Instances of Omicron's startling transmissibility are proliferating. Following a Nov. 26 Christmas party for a renewable energy company at an Oslo restaurant, 80 of 111 guests tested positive for coronavirus, with genetic sampling suggesting all were likely Omicron, according to the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.</p> <p>In Hong Kong, a 36-year-old man was identified as one of the earliest known cases of Omicron on Nov. 13 in one of the city's quarantine hotels. Five days later, a 62-year-old man staying in the room across the</p>

corridor also tested positive for the variant, despite having no contact with his neighbor. Researchers concluded the variant must have traveled across the hallway.

In the U.K., [Omicron has displaced Delta as the dominant variant](#) of coronavirus in England and Scotland in less than a month and it is only days behind doing the same in Denmark, Danish health authorities say.

It is already the dominant variant in Ontario, Canada, accounting for 51% of new cases, according to a panel of scientists that advises the province's government. British health data suggest Omicron cases are doubling through much of the country in less than two days.

In the U.S., the Delta variant represented about 96% of cases across the country in the week to Dec. 11, while the Omicron variant accounted for around 3%. Some areas are seeing higher numbers: In New York and New Jersey, Omicron was estimated to make up around 13% of Covid-19 cases.

Behind Omicron's rapid spread are a set of mutations that give it an edge over older variants.

Among Omicron's roughly 50 mutations, at least 30 are on the spike protein, the structure that helps the virus infiltrate cells and that is also the main target of vaccines.

Lab tests in South Africa, Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S. have shown that antibodies' ability to prevent the variant from entering cells is weaker than with other strains, giving Omicron a much better shot at infecting people who have been vaccinated or infected previously. That means it can spread rapidly even in highly vaccinated populations.

Modeling published Friday by researchers at Imperial College London estimates [the risk of reinfection with Omicron](#) is 5.4 times greater than with Delta, suggesting limited protection from prior infection. The study, which hasn't been peer reviewed, also reported a reduction in vaccine effectiveness against infection with Omicron after two doses, compared with Delta.

Almost 70% of the U.K. population is fully vaccinated yet Omicron has propelled a record run-up in cases, prodding the government to ask people to work from home where possible, limit mixing with other households in the days before Christmas and get booster shots to build extra immunity. Denmark and Norway have also tightened public-health restrictions to beat back a wave of cases.

"If the virus is able to partially evade the immune response induced either by prior infection with another variant or by vaccines, then it will be able to infect and spread more efficiently. This is what we are seeing with the Omicron variant," said Lawrence Young, a virologist and professor of molecular oncology at the University of Warwick.

A growing body of evidence suggests Omicron's mutations may also give it inherent transmission advantages in addition to its ability to evade the body's immune responses.

One study, not yet peer reviewed, by researchers in Hong Kong found that Omicron infects and multiplies 70 times faster than the Delta variant in the airways, which could explain why the new variant seems to transmit more quickly.

Things were different in the lungs, however—the researchers found that Omicron replicates less efficiently in the lungs than the original version of the virus, which could help explain why Omicron has been linked to less severe disease in many of the people it infects.

Another study, also not yet peer reviewed, seemed to support the Hong Kong team's findings: Researchers showed that an Omicron pseudovirus—a synthetic version of the Omicron variant—was better at infecting cells than a pseudovirus of Delta and the original version of the virus.

If the virus multiplies faster, "it can start transmitting to others earlier," said Julian Tang, a clinical virologist and professor of respiratory medicine at the University of Leicester.

British public-health officials say Omicron's advantages mean the interval between a newly infected person becoming infectious to others appears shorter with Omicron, perhaps three days compared with six or more with Delta. They have also estimated the risk of someone spreading the virus to another member of their household is three times higher with Omicron compared with Delta.

One metric epidemiologists use to measure a virus's transmissibility is its effective reproduction number, or R, the average number of people an infected person will infect. This will change from place to place depending on levels of immunity and public-health policies in place to control transmission. The higher the value, the more transmissible the virus.

Susan Hopkins, who leads the U.K. Health Security Agency, told lawmakers in the U.K. Parliament on Thursday that her agency estimates the current R value of Omicron to be between 3 and 5. The overall R value for the epidemic in the U.K. is around 1 to 1.2, she said.

That high level of transmission is problematic, scientists say, even if Omicron does prove to cause milder disease, especially in those vaccinated or with a degree of immunity from prior infection. Booster shots have been shown to increase protection against infection. Scientists are broadly optimistic that vaccines will help keep severe disease and death at bay with Omicron.

A paper awaiting peer review by disease modelers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, described several possible scenarios for the months ahead in England as Omicron continues to spread, which varied to the extent the variant could evade immunity and how effective boosters were at slowing infection. All the scenarios point to many more cases, hospital admissions and deaths.

"We better be careful about making a prediction that it's less severe, therefore it's going to be better," Anthony Fauci, President Biden's chief medical adviser, said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal's The Journal podcast, released Thursday.

"Because if you infect a lot more people, the lack of severity could be overcome by the fact that a lot more people get infected."

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HEADLINE	12/18 Iran top diplomat in Yemen leaves
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/irans-top-diplomat-in-yemen-leaves-the-country-11639868219?mod=hp_lead_pos6
GIST	<p>Iran's top diplomat in Yemen flew out of the country on Saturday in an agreement between Houthi militants controlling the capital and Saudi Arabia, according to regional officials.</p> <p>Hassan Irloo, who was smuggled into Yemen last year and named Iran's ambassador to parts of the country controlled by the Houthis, left on an Iraqi military plane sent to pick him up, according to Saudi, Iranian and Houthi officials.</p> <p>In recent days, Houthi leaders had asked Saudi Arabia to let Mr. Irloo immediately fly back to Iran. Saudi Arabia has been ensnared in Yemen since launching a military campaign in 2014 to try to force the Houthis out of power and maintains a sweeping air blockade of Sana'a, Yemen's capital.</p> <p>The kingdom cast Mr. Irloo's departure as a sign of friction between the Houthis and Tehran.</p> <p>Iranian officials said their diplomat was leaving Yemen to get urgent medical treatment after contracting Covid-19.</p> <p>Mr. Irloo, a member of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has played a key diplomatic and military role in Yemen, where he worked with Houthi forces on their political and battlefield strategies, according to regional officials.</p>

Saeed Khatibzadeh, a spokesman with Iran's foreign ministry, and Mohamed Abdelsalam, a Houthi spokesman, both dismissed Saudi speculation that the diplomat's departure was the result of friction between Tehran and the Yemeni forces.

The Saudis said Mr. Irloo showed no signs he was seriously ill from Covid-19. Instead, Saudi officials said, Mr. Irloo's influence in Yemen bolstered a negative perception in the country that the militant force answers to Tehran.

After seven years of civil war, the Houthis remain in control of Sana'a and govern much of the country's north.

In return for allowing Mr. Irloo to leave Yemen, Riyadh had asked the Houthis to release a number of Saudis held by the militant group, according to regional officials. It wasn't immediately clear on Saturday if the Houthis had agreed to release any Saudis.

Since the Houthis seized control of Sana'a in 2014, Iran has steadily increased its support for the militant force.

Saudi Arabia's politically unpopular war has damaged its relations with the U.S., where President Biden last year cut off much of the U.S. military aid used by Saudi Arabia to battle the Houthis. Over Saudi objections, Mr. Biden also reversed a last minute move by the Trump administration to officially designate the Houthis as a terrorist group.

At the same time, Iran stepped up its support for the Houthis. Tehran welcomed a Houthi diplomat to Iran and allowed the group to open an embassy. Iran has provided the Houthis with ballistic missiles, drones, training and advisers, according to Saudi and U.S. officials. Houthi forces have stepped up their drone and missile strikes targeting Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Irloo's departure from Yemen comes amid a diplomatic deadlock in efforts to end the seven-year-old war. The U.S. and U.N. have hit repeated roadblocks in their efforts to broker a cease-fire while Houthi fighters have gained new ground on the battlefield.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Sky-high lumber prices are back
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/sky-high-lumber-prices-are-back-11639842879?mod=hp_lead_pos4
GIST	<p>Lumber prices have shot up again in a rise reminiscent of a year ago, when high-climbing wood prices warned of the hinky supply lines and broad inflation to come.</p> <p>Futures for January delivery ended Friday at \$1,089.10 per thousand board feet, twice the price for a prompt delivery in mid-November.</p> <p>Cash prices are way up as well. Pricing service Random Lengths said that its framing composite index, which tracks on-the-spot sales, has jumped 65% since October, to \$915. A \$129 gain this week was the biggest on record, eclipsing a \$124 jump in May, when lumber prices crested at all-time highs.</p> <p>Though lumber is traded in esoteric markets, two-by-fours became a proxy in the debate over whether inflation would fade with distance from the lockdown. In June, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell pointed to lumber prices plunging from a shocking peak as evidence that surging costs would subside. On Wednesday, he said the central bank would hasten the wind down of its bond-buying program, setting the stage for a series of interest-rate hikes meant to tame inflation.</p> <p>Lumber prices have a way to go before they threaten the records set in spring, when futures hit \$1,711.20. Still, lumber prices with a comma were unimaginable before the lockdown, when mills were caught off guard by do-it-yourself and home-building booms and all the decks needed to facilitate outdoor dining.</p>

Analysts and traders say conditions are ripe for prices to keep climbing through winter, as they often do ahead of the spring building season.

Flooding in British Columbia has cut off sawmills from forests and customers, unusually warm autumn weather has extended the building season and wood buyers are loading up in fear of further price increases and supply problems.

The prospect of higher interest rates cooling the hot housing market also looms. Higher borrowing costs would reduce buyers' ability to keep up with the price hikes that builders have used to offset their own increased costs. Most Fed officials have penciled in at least three quarter-percentage point rate increases next year.

"Builders think that they're getting close to the end of a cycle and they're doing everything they can to get houses going," said Matt Layman, an analyst and consultant who publishes Layman's Lumber Guide. "They know they can pay \$1,500 for two-by-fours. They didn't like it, but it didn't hurt them."

Random Lengths said that demand has exceeded supply, prompting sawmills to aggressively raise prices in hopes of slowing orders that are backing up into the new year. "Some producers unable to dissuade buyers with defensive pricing went off the market," the trade publication said.

Sawmills in British Columbia have reduced output since rains washed out roads and railways last month, sending prices higher for the northwest's spruce, pine and fir. Busy builders hammering away through balmy fall weather flocked to eastern markets for wood, pushing up prices around the Great Lakes and in the South.

In a recent survey of building-product dealers, 20% of respondents told John Burns Real Estate Consulting that they held what they deemed to be excess inventory of lumber, down from 56% who said in August that they had more than enough on hand.

The firm expects home construction to accelerate in 2022 and strong growth in major remodeling jobs due to the record amount of home equity available to pay for new kitchens and additions.

"They should be sitting on more inventory," said Todd Tomalak, who tracks building products for the consulting firm. "It's the perfect storm for another wave of building-product shortages, a rinse and repeat in lumber and for a lot of other stuff as well."

On Wednesday, the National Association of Home Builders said its index of builder confidence, though down slightly from last autumn's peak exuberance, hit one of its most optimistic readings dating back to 1985. On Thursday, the Commerce Department said that construction started on 1.679 million homes last month at a seasonally adjusted annual rate. That is up 12% from October and the most since March.

The number of started homes exceeded those that were completed by the largest margin since 1984, when double-digit mortgage rates tanked the housing market. The big gap reflects the difficulty builders have had procuring materials, appliances and fixtures necessary to finish houses.

Builders have had no trouble raising prices to counteract their own increased costs, because ultralow mortgage rates have kept monthly payments affordable. Despite record prices for lumber and other materials, home builders have been reporting some of their highest profit margins ever.

Builders including Toll Brothers Inc. , Lennar Corp and Hovnanian Enterprises Inc. say they are still working through the lumber bought when prices peaked in spring and expect margins to increase later next year when they sell houses built with wood purchased after prices crashed back to earth this summer. Executives with those firms told investors during recent calls that they are confident they can raise home prices more if lumber makes another run.

	“The market just feels really strong regarding pricing opportunities, so we’re comfortable,” said Ara Hovnanian, chief executive of his eponymous firm, which sold homes for an average price of about \$445,000 in the fiscal year that ended Oct. 31, compared with roughly \$419,000 a year earlier.
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HEADLINE	12/19 Supply-chain mess threatens holiday sales
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/supply-chain-mess-threatens-holiday-sales-from-hot-sauce-to-board-games-11639909803?mod=hp_lead_pos7
GIST	<p>Supply-chain disruptions are threatening to rob some companies of holiday sales, leaving them short on packaging and transportation at a critical time of year.</p> <p>Some makers of toys, games and other consumer goods are racing to figure out how to get products to market, and having to decide which customers will receive orders as stocks run low. In some cases, companies are figuring out how to remake products to have something to sell during a season that can generate a big portion of annual sales.</p> <p>In Casper, Wyo., hot-sauce producer Eli Dicklich said he has enough ketchup, brown sugar and other ingredients to make his Pine Ridge brand of sauces—but not enough 8-ounce glass jars to bottle them and ship to customers. For several months this winter, the shortage of jars has meant his company, Herbadashery LLC, hasn’t been able to sell its three-jar holiday packs that include jalapeño barbecue and sweet mustard sauces. Mr. Dicklich recently received a shipment of larger, 18-ounce jars and is now rushing to get those into customer homes before Christmas.</p> <p>“I couldn’t fill new orders coming in,” Mr. Dicklich said. “I’m sure I missed out on a bunch.”</p> <p>The holiday period is a key season for the U.S. economy, as consumers buy gifts, spend holiday bonuses and stock larders for holiday meals. For some companies, sales across the Thanksgiving-to-New Year’s Day period can make up a large portion of revenue for the year. In 2020, nearly 30% of sales at hobby, toy and game stores occurred in November and December, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and December was the highest sales month for appliance stores.</p> <p>Mr. Dicklich and other companies dealing with wide-ranging supply-chain disruptions—including backlogged ports, scarce materials and components, and too few workers to staff production lines and drive trucks—said that some of their 2021 holiday sales are likely lost for good. The problems could also weigh on future sales: Some executives said their companies risk reputational harm if they aren’t able to deliver products on time, or at all.</p> <p>In response, businesses are adding shifts, finding new suppliers and taking other steps to ensure their products get to customers and under Christmas trees in the final days of the 2021 season.</p> <p>After facing port delays and missing a major retail customer’s delivery deadline, Kemi Tignor’s puzzles were still stuck at one U.S. warehouse and needed to be moved to another. She said she decided to take matters into her own hands. Ms. Tignor owns Little Likes Kids LLC, a Washington, D.C.-based company that makes racially diverse puzzles for children.</p> <p>Ms. Tignor rented a U-Haul in Washington, D.C., in late October, and drove four hours to a warehouse in Monmouth Junction, N.J. “I do not have any equipment to load the truck and I have no men with me,” Ms. Tignor said she emailed an employee at the New Jersey warehouse. “Will your warehouse be able to load the U-Haul truck?”</p> <p>Ms. Tignor got the puzzles loaded with the help of warehouse workers and drove an additional six hours to a logistics provider in Rhode Island that could ship them to retail stores. The multistate dash ensured her puzzles were on store shelves at places like Target Corp. and Nordstrom Inc. for Black Friday and the busy holiday selling season, she said.</p>

Some manufacturers are having to make hard choices about who gets the products that are available. A few weeks ago, MWB Toy Co., based in Danbury, Conn., temporarily cut off some wholesale business to focus on customers buying directly online. Jim Barber, the managing partner of the company, which sells toys under the Luke's Toy Factory brand, said it didn't have enough of its buildable toy trucks to go around.

Mr. Barber estimated that Luke's holiday sales could be 50% higher if he had enough parts. But he said he is hesitant to invest tens of thousands of dollars in new molds, because he doesn't know how long the heightened demand will last.

"All of a sudden we are out of firetruck ladders. This week we are out of dump truck gates," Mr. Barber said. "Right now, everyone is working full tilt."

Adaptive Tech Solutions LLC, based in Sand Springs, Okla., modifies and makes toys for children with physical disabilities. The company's owner, Denise Bandl, said many of the products she needs to buy have become hard to find because of supply-chain problems. She now regularly spends time looking for new suppliers, she said, and is working extra hours to fulfill orders that do come in before Christmas.

"We try the best we can to keep our shelves stocked," Ms. Bandl said. "Right now we have more holes than we ever had."

Others are redesigning products to avoid known shortages and discovering some advantages.

Board-game maker Continuum Games Inc. developed a new form of charades, which eventually involves a group acting out one complex clue while a single person guesses. Charade Parade, which is sold in stores and online, was initially designed to include a specially made electronic clock. The company's supplier in China said earlier this year that it wouldn't be possible to produce the timer for the holidays. Wayne Rothschild, the company's vice president of product development, estimates that about 70% of its toys and board games are sold to consumers in the fourth quarter.

The Indianapolis company decided to build a smartphone application and include a phone stand instead. Now, the board game's instructions direct players to download an app, and use that to time the game. The app has turned into a new revenue stream for the company, Mr. Rothschild said, as it lets users purchase new word sets or buy the entire game digitally. It can also automatically take pictures during the game.

"This brought us into the 2000s," Mr. Rothschild said.

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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron spread cancels events
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/cities-cancel-holiday-events-tighten-covid-restrictions-to-fight-omicrons-spread-11639855512?mod=hp_lead_pos1
GIST	<p>More places in Europe and the U.S. were tightening restrictions, canceling holiday gatherings and bracing for a surge in new Covid-19 cases, as officials worked to boost testing and healthcare capacity amid the rising risk from the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The coronavirus's Omicron variant has been detected in 89 countries, and Covid-19 cases of the variant are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission, the World Health Organization said Saturday. The variant is spreading rapidly even in countries with high levels of immunity in the population, the WHO said.</p> <p>The Dutch government imposed lockdown measures, with all nonessential shops, bars and restaurants closed until mid-January.</p>

[Paris canceled](#) its traditional New Year's Eve festivities on the Champs-Élysées. London Mayor Sadiq Khan declared a "major incident" in the British capital following what he said was the largest daily rise in cases in the city since the pandemic began, with 26,000 new cases recorded in the latest 24 hours.

President Biden on Tuesday plans to deliver remarks on the status of the country's fight against Covid-19, as the U.S. sees rising cases, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said [in a tweet Saturday](#).

Mr. Biden will announce new steps the administration is taking to help communities and issue a stark warning of what the winter will look like for Americans that remain unvaccinated, she said. "We are prepared for the rising case levels," she said in the tweet.

Harvard University will move to mostly remote learning and work for the first three weeks of January, "prompted by the rapid rise in Covid-19 cases locally and across the country, as well as the growing presence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant," university administrators said Saturday in a letter to the Harvard community, writing, "Please know that we do not take this step lightly."

Stanford University will start the winter quarter online and is requiring students to get a Covid-19 vaccine booster by the end of January.

[CNN is closing its offices](#) to nonessential employees, the network's president, Jeff Zucker, told employees in a memo Saturday, as [Covid-19 cases](#) rose at the network and nationwide.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul announced the launch of 40 new pop-up vaccination sites across the state. "The winter surge is in full force, but we are not defenseless," she said, after announcing Friday that Covid-19 infections hit a daily record there. New York set another record in daily cases reported Saturday.

[NBC's "Saturday Night Live"](#) said that it would have no live audience for its taping this week and that the show would go on with a limited cast and crew.

The National Hockey League on Saturday paused games for the Boston Bruins and Nashville Predators after also recently temporarily stopping play for the Calgary Flames, Colorado Avalanche and Florida Panthers.

In Canada, the government of Prince Edward Island said it was pausing indoor group sports and recreational activities starting Saturday.

Rhode Island will reinstate a partial indoor-mask mandate starting Monday. In Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan said rising hospitalizations there were "triggering a new round of actions," including reducing nonurgent medical surgeries.

Holiday cancellations ranged from an annual church dinner in Austin, Minn., to a popular living nativity event in Santa Fe, N.M. The United Christian Church in Lincolnville Center, Maine, sent an email to its congregation Saturday morning saying it has canceled its in-person Christmas Eve service and will move it to a remote event because of the [surge of Covid cases](#) there.

"It's a very difficult decision to make," the Rev. Elizabeth Barnum, the church's pastor, said. "One of the most meaningful services of the year is our 200-year-old meeting house filled with church members and community members and people coming home for the holidays. But we are also called to keep our community healthy and to support our overwhelmed healthcare system."

The scramble for testing continued as many people rushed to get peace of mind before attending holiday get-togethers. Roxanna Garcia, who is 36 years old and plans to travel to Honduras next week to visit family, said she visited four New York City drugstores Friday night before finding a rapid Covid-19 test in stock. Seeking extra confirmation of her negative result, she went to Queens Hospital in New York to get a PCR test early Saturday morning and said the line was around the parking lot.

“It’s obviously good that people are taking precautions and getting tested,” said Ms. Garcia, who is a nurse. “But it did feel like, it’s two years into this and we still can’t seem to find a more streamlined way of getting tested?”

A federal appeals court Friday reinstated [Biden administration rules](#) that require many employers to ensure that workers are vaccinated or tested weekly for Covid-19. A divided panel of the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dissolved [a stay issued by another court](#) that had blocked the rules. The majority, in a [2-to-1 ruling](#), said legal challenges to the administration’s vaccination-and-testing requirements were likely to fail.

In New York, the Christmas Spectacular Starring the Radio City Rockettes canceled the remainder of its season Friday, citing increasing challenges from the pandemic. A number of Broadway shows [canceled performances in recent days](#) because of Covid-19 cases among cast members. Organizers of New Year’s Eve festivities at Times Square said they would go ahead with an outdoor celebration among fully vaccinated revelers.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Philippine typhoon death toll rises
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/19/typhoon-rai-dozens-more-deaths-confirmed-as-relief-efforts-ramp-up-in-philippines
GIST	<p>The official death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year has risen to 89 people, as efforts to deliver water and food to devastated islands ramped up.</p> <p>More than 300,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Typhoon Rai ravaged the southern and central regions of the archipelago.</p> <p>The storm knocked out communications and electricity in many areas, ripped off roofs, toppled concrete power poles and flooded villages.</p> <p>Arthur Yap, governor of the popular tourist destination Bohol, said on his official Facebook page that mayors on the devastated island had so far reported 63 deaths in their towns.</p> <p>That took the overall number of reported deaths to 89, according to the latest official figures, Agence France-Presse reported.</p> <p>But the toll was likely to rise as disaster agencies assessed the full extent of the death and destruction from the storm across the vast archipelago.</p> <p>Yap said a number of people were still missing on the island and 13 were injured after the storm smashed into the country Thursday as a super typhoon packing wind speeds of 195 km/h (120 mph).</p> <p>“Communications are still down. Only 21 mayors out of 48 have reached out to us,” Yap said, raising fears the of more fatalities in the flood-hit province where some residents were rescued from their rooftops.</p> <p>Floodwaters rose rapidly in Bohol’s riverside town of Loboc, where residents were trapped on their roofs and trees. They were rescued by the coast guard the following day.</p> <p>President Rodrigo Duterte flew to the region Saturday and promised 2bn pesos (\$40m) in new aid. Aides said the president will visit Bohol on Sunday.</p> <p>Thousands of military, police, coast guard and fire personnel are being deployed to assist in search and rescue efforts in the worst-affected areas of the vast archipelago.</p> <p>Heavy machinery - like backhoes and front-end loaders - are also being sent to help clear roads blocked by fallen power poles and trees.</p>

Charities and emergency services have appealed for donations.

A Philippine navy ship carrying goods and other relief would depart for Bohol on Monday, Yap said, after he earlier declared a state of calamity on the island.

An aerial survey of damage to the island's north made it "very clear that our people have suffered greatly in terms of destroyed homes and agricultural losses," he said.

Thousands of boxes of water had been delivered after power cuts across the island disrupted water refilling stations, Yap added.

There has also been widespread destruction on Siargao, Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which bore the brunt of Rai when it slammed into the Philippines.

Aerial photos shared by the military showed severe damage in the Siargao town of General Luna, where many surfers and holidaymakers had flocked ahead of Christmas, with buildings stripped of roofs and debris littering the ground.

Dinagat governor Arlene Bag-ao said Saturday the damage to the island's landscape was "reminiscent if not worse" than that caused by Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

Haiyan, called Yolanda in the Philippines, was the deadliest cyclone on record in the country, leaving more than 7,300 people dead or missing.

Rai hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season - most cyclones typically develop between July and October.

Scientists have long warned that typhoons are becoming more powerful and strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes warmer because of human-driven climate change.

About 20 storms and typhoons batter the Philippines each year. The archipelago is located in the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" region, making it one of the world's most disaster-prone countries.

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HEADLINE	12/18 Global supply chain crisis: another 2yrs?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/18/global-supply-chain-crisis-could-last-another-two-years-warn-experts
GIST	<p>In Britain it's alcohol, in Canada it's maple syrup, while in Australia it's a crucial additive for diesel trucks, and in New Zealand it's brown sugar. These are just some of the many shortages affecting consumers and businesses around the world as industry experts warn that the supply chain crisis prompted by the coronavirus pandemic could last for many more months and even up to two years.</p> <p>Although there are signs that some bottlenecks are easing, the onset of the Omicron Covid variant could lead to new shutdowns, sending another disruptive spasm through the global system.</p> <p>The gravest appears to be an outbreak of Covid this week in the Chinese manufacturing hub of Zhejiang, which is home to the world's largest cargo port, Ningbo-Zhoushan. Tens of thousands are in quarantine under China's strict zero-Covid policy and some local authorities have urged workers not to travel home "unnecessarily" for lunar new year festival in February. "Further supply chain disruption is a significant possibility," economic analysts at Capital Economics said in a note.</p>

Industry experts and economists believe the problems could persist as the finely calibrated network of world trade, already weakened by months of shipping backlogs, labour shortages and geopolitical tensions, remains “discombobulated”.

Maersk, one of the big three shipping companies, said the worst delays were still on the US west coast where ships were waiting four weeks to unload due to the lack of workers on land.

This creates a chaotic “ripple effect” around the world with ships locked into tight deadlines and a glut of containers in some ports in the US and Europe, but not enough in ports throughout Asia.

“With winter, year-end holidays in North America and Europe, Chinese new year in Asia, the already stretched supply chain will get even further stretched as workers, truckers and terminals are off for holidays,” a Maersk spokesperson said.

“Normally we can absorb these seasonal impacts fairly quickly, but when already stretched, it just becomes a multiplier.”

“We do not see major improvements as long as we have line of sight, which is into 2022 ... Very likely that it continues thereafter and for North America even longer.”

In Felixstowe, the UK’s biggest container port, the dockside [remains clogged with containers](#) waiting to be emptied, meaning that empty containers coming back on trucks from inland warehouses have to be diverted to other ports.

Robert Keen, of the British International Freight Association, said driver shortages were being felt all over the world with port infrastructure not keeping pace with the container vessels. Covid was “an ongoing problem”, he said.

Flavio Macau, an associate professor specialising in supply chains at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, said that fine-tuning could take years and that the world economy was still suffering from a kind of “high blood pressure” as it lurched from one disruption to another.

“Lockdowns are hopefully a thing of the past outside China, but there are still all kinds of restrictions in place to the movement of people, including workers with in-demand skills.

“My view is that supply chains still have high blood pressure, consistently showing arrhythmia. It will take to mid-2024 to get back to “normal’.”

As well as the possible shortages of Christmas drinks and sugar for festive treats, economies such as the UK and US [are facing rising inflation](#) across a range of goods from energy to apples as a torrent of demand puts pressure on insufficient supply.

Shipping accounts for the movement of at least 90% of goods around the world and the cost of transporting things by sea has rocketed in the past year. For example, the Drewry world container index measuring the cost of moving a 40ft container [is 170% higher than it was a year ago](#). The price on some particularly in-demand routes such as Shanghai to Rotterdam has increased by almost 200%; in the case of the Dutch port to New York, the cost has risen by 212%.

Basic consumer staples are spiralling in price because of higher shipping costs and heightened demand from consumers stuck at home for months and unable to spend any money on treats such as holidays and nights out. Coffee prices have doubled over the past year, [according to current data](#), as has the price of oats. Lumber, cotton, wheat and palm oil have all risen by more than 30%.

Not surprisingly, inflation has touched decades-long highs in western economies such as the US, Britain and Germany, bringing calls for [an end to the ultra-loose monetary policies](#) pursued by central banks since 2008.

Roy Cummins, who has worked in logistics for 30 years and until recently was chief executive of the Port of Brisbane in Australia, said there was some sense that things were improving but he estimated that constraints on the international shipping network were unlikely to be alleviated for the next two years.

His point is illustrated by the bottleneck of giant containers that has built up off the west coast of the US. With so many ships unable to dock and unload, more than 80% of the 434,000 20ft containers exported out of the Port of Los Angeles in September went out empty. Shipping companies can make up to eight times more money taking goods from China to the US, so it made sense to get the containers back to Asia rather than wait for them to be filled.

This has fuelled huge imbalances throughout the system, he said: “The supply chains were discombobulated. Shipping capacity was quickly exhausted at the start of the pandemic because everyone planned for a big decline in demand but in fact there was a surge because people wanted to buy things. Then the supply side was hit hard with ports, warehouses and truck companies all short of workers.

“But you can’t flick a switch and get new capacity back on. New ships are not ready until 2023. Shipping supply should normalise within a year but does the economy normalise?”

Before the pandemic struck, the shipping industry had driven down the cost of transporting goods and had perfected the celebrated “just-in-time” system whereby commodities and spare parts were moved seamlessly around the globe and delivered exactly when and where they were needed. This reduced corporate costs dramatically, for example by reducing or completely eradicating the need for on-site warehousing.

If the uncertainty continues and consumers carry on with online shopping splurges, Cummins says, “you will see ‘just-in-time’ becoming ‘just-in-case’ as companies build up inventories to guard against disruptions”.

Dennis Unkovic, a US corporate lawyer, trade expert and author of Transforming the Global Supply Chain, says the Covid crisis had shown that the system was dependent on a just-in-time model designed to run perfectly, “but that’s not what’s happened”.

The deterioration in relations between the US and China which led to trade tariffs and loss of trust was also having a bigger impact than hitherto recognised, he says, dislocating the mechanics of world trade that have been taken for granted for many years. Cyber-attacks and robotics have also made companies review their supply chains and source materials closer to home.

“For anyone expecting the post-pandemic world to return to ‘normal’, forget it. Whatever was considered normal before the pandemic is not coming back.

“Companies have to make the supply chain a priority,” he says. “If it breaks down we can’t say we didn’t see it coming.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron spreading rapidly; 89 countries
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/18/who-says-omicron-in-89-countries-and-spreading-rapidly
GIST	<p>The Omicron coronavirus variant has been reported in 89 countries and the number of cases is doubling in 1.5 to three days in areas with community transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said.</p> <p>Omicron is spreading rapidly in countries with high levels of population immunity, but it is unclear if this is due to the virus’s ability to evade immunity, its inherent increased transmissibility or a combination of both, the WHO said in an update.</p>

	<p>The agency designated Omicron a variant of concern on 26 November, soon after it was first detected, and much is still not known about it, including the severity of the illness it causes.</p> <p>“There are still limited data on the clinical severity of Omicron,” the WHO said. “More data are needed to understand the severity profile and how severity is impacted by vaccination and pre-existing immunity.”</p> <p>It added: “There are still limited available data, and no peer-reviewed evidence, on vaccine efficacy or effectiveness to date for Omicron.”</p> <p>The WHO warned that with cases rising so rapidly, hospitals could be overwhelmed in some places.</p> <p>“Hospitalisations in the UK and South Africa continue to rise, and given rapidly increasing case counts, it is possible that many healthcare systems may become quickly overwhelmed,” it said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron grim but small signs of hope
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/dec/18/is-there-any-good-news-at-all-on-omicron-yes-there-are-small-signs-of-hope
GIST	<p>It’s hard to find much good news among the waves of grim statistics that have washed over the nation since the emergence of Omicron.</p> <p>Once again, the NHS is threatened and again, the prospect of a new year lockdown looms. We seem to have gained nothing in the battle against Covid-19 during the past 12 months.</p> <p>Such an interpretation is harsh, however. Yes, we are again facing a serious medical crisis, but a number of factors suggest there may be some ground for a little optimism, though scientists are careful to add the key caveat that we are only at the beginning of our dealings with the Omicron variant.</p> <p>Anti-viral drugs</p> <p>Over the past year, a number of anti-viral drugs, such as Xevudy (sotrovimab) and Lagevrio (molnupiravir), have been shown to ward off serious illness and have been earmarked in the UK for vulnerable people – those being treated for cancer, for example – who subsequently become ill with Covid-19. Both drugs reduce the amount of virus produced in the body after infection and lessen the chance that patients will need hospital treatment.</p> <p>“Those most at risk, such as cancer patients, are the most likely to need health service care, so with this new, highly infectious strain, these drugs should help reduce the burden of Covid-19 on that population and have a knock-on effect on the health service as well,” said Professor Penny Ward of King’s College, London. “On top of booster vaccines, these drugs will provide important additional protection for those who are most at risk.”</p> <p>South Africa</p> <p>Omicron was first pinpointed in South Africa, which then experienced a very rapid rise in numbers of Covid-19 cases. But now these case numbers appear to have peaked, while early indications also suggest that deaths could be lower than they have been for previous waves. Thus, the country is experiencing a relatively brief wave of milder infections. Health officials have also reported that people appear to recover more quickly from Omicron compared with Delta, whether they were in hospital or not.</p> <p>It remains to be seen whether these figures mean Omicron produces milder illness than previous variants in other countries, including the UK. Nevertheless it remains a possibility with some scientists expressing quiet optimism, though others are more cautious.</p> <p>“In South Africa, they had a very large wave of Delta only a few months ago, so they are likely to have a fair amount of immunity lingering in the population and that could be providing protection,” said Lance</p>

Turtle, senior clinical lecturer in infectious diseases at Liverpool University. “In the UK, our protection might have begun to weaken, so we might see more serious cases.”

This point was also made by the government’s scientific advisers, Sage. “Even if there were to be a modest reduction in severity compared to Delta, very high numbers of infections would still lead to significant pressure on hospitals,” it noted in minutes for its meeting last Thursday.

However, Professor Martin Hibberd, of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, was still optimistic. “We are in a better position than a year ago, as most people have now had at least some vaccine, or previous infection, which may help to reduce the severity experienced by many people.”

From the laboratory

A third piece of hopeful news is that scientists have uncovered a possible biological explanation for Omicron’s apparent reduced severity. This work was carried out by Michael Chan Chi-wai at the University of Hong Kong who found that although the new variant is much more efficient, compared with Delta, in reproducing in the upper respiratory tract, where it can be coughed out onto others, it is far less efficient in spreading in the lungs where it would pose the greatest danger to an infected person.

In this way, the variant may [spread between individuals](#) far more quickly but not reach more vulnerable parts of their anatomies. This would reduce the severity of illness it can trigger.

However, Chan has counselled caution in interpreting the implications of his work. “By infecting many more people, a very infectious virus may cause more severe disease and death, even though the virus itself may be less pathogenic,” he said. “The overall threat from Omicron variant is likely to be very significant.”

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HEADLINE	12/19 Floods show B.C. not ready for big quake
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/19/big-one-canada-floods-show-british-columbia-not-ready-earthquake
GIST	<p>Canada’s largest port is shut down. Highways have snapped, buckled and crumbled. Bridges are washed into raging rivers and landslides rumble down mountainsides, burying cars and stranding travellers. Rail lines linking the west coast to the rest of North America are damaged. Oil pipelines cease operating.</p> <p>Three years ago, officials at Vancouver’s main transport hubs were told to prepare for a scenario in which nearly 3 million people in south-western British Columbia were cut off from the rest of the country.</p> <p>Those warnings became a reality in mid-November when the region was hit by record rainfall, flooding and landslides. But in their meeting, officials had gathered to plan for a far more devastating disaster: a powerful earthquake, known as the Big One, that has long been predicted to strike the region.</p> <p>The widespread destruction from the flooding has highlighted the vulnerability of the region’s infrastructure, but experts warn that if the province fails to learn from the current crisis, it faces larger, deadlier and costlier disasters in the future.</p> <p>Geologists say a massive earthquake will almost certainly hit south-western British Columbia in the coming years, with the odds as high as 30% over the next half-century. Residents have long feared the Big One, a rupture of the Cascadia subduction zone far offshore that will unleash a tsunami and inflict widespread destruction. As many as 10,000 people could die in southern British Columbia and the Pacific north-west of the United States. Fires alone could cause as much as C\$10bn in damage. Water lines will be severed. First responders could be unable even to leave their stations.</p> <p>The last large quake in the area – the Cascadia megathrust in 1700 – was strong enough for its effects to be felt all the way across the Pacific in Japan.</p>

But the Cascadia plate boundary has been “eerily quiet” for many years, said Edwin Nissen, a seismologist at the University of Victoria. “Most people here likely haven’t actually felt an earthquake in their lifetime. And so they’re a bit disconnected from what could happen.”

Even a smaller quake could prove catastrophic if it strikes closer to an urban centre.

“The danger is that there could be a bullseye hit on one city,” said Nissen, pointing to the [2011 quake](#) that struck Christchurch, New Zealand, the effects of which are [still visible a decade later](#). “A localized quake could be far more devastating even than the Big One.”

But experts also say the recent flooding in the province has given the region a rare glimpse into its fragility – and a chance to fix that.

“People don’t appreciate the importance of critical infrastructure until you see a flaw in it,” said Jean Slick, head of the disaster management program at Victoria’s Royal Roads university. “When they’re in our own back yard, it gives us this opportunity to understand the threat in a completely different way.”

Officials in British Columbia have faced criticism for never activating the mobile emergency alert system even as it became clear that days of heavy rain would have a devastating effect on communities.

Meanwhile, evidence suggests [the province knew its diking system](#), which failed, wasn’t up to standard. Residents forced from flood-ravaged areas [detailed days of confusion](#) when searching for shelter.

One month after the floods, British Columbia remains in a state of emergency. Gas is rationed in major coastal cities and at least one major highway system will take months to fully repair and thousands have lost their homes. Landscapes have been altered and the route of at least one major river has changed.

But as the province begins the [difficult task of cleaning up and rebuilding](#), experts hope the floods will also help the public understand the risks that emerge from urban planning decisions.

“When you get the premier and ministers saying this is a natural disaster, we’re left thinking that nature did this to us. But [there are no natural disasters](#). Flooding is a natural hazard. [We build and live and work in floodplains](#). We’re the ones that create disaster risk,” she said. “The question is, how do we live with risk?”

Slick, who served as an expert adviser on the [BC auditor general’s report](#) into the province’s earthquake preparedness, says recent events have had a “focusing” effect on how people understand natural hazards and risk. Empty store shelves and panic buying from both the pandemic and floods have exposed the costs of ignored warnings and the importance of preparing for future crises.

“When we rebuild, let’s not put blinders on and just focus on floods. Let’s make sure that we’re considering all hazards, like climate risks and earthquakes,” she said.

But rebuilding often comes with an eagerness to return to normal as quickly as possible.

“There’s going to be a rush to rebuild, and [there’s pressure] to put things back the way they were before,” said Glenn McGillivray, managing director of the Institute for Catastrophic Loss Reduction. “But is anybody going to stop and say, ‘Hey, wait a minute, why don’t we build this thing better, so we’re not doing this again in two more years?’”

Even simple changes can lead to outsized benefits. As one of the province’s natural gas providers upgrades its metering system, McGillivray and others have called for seismic shut-offs to be installed on every line, as is common in Japan, to prevent fires after an earthquake.

But [previous studies](#) suggests British Columbia remains unprepared for a large tremor.

	<p>“We know that there will be a big earthquake, but we’re still not as prepared as we should be. And scientists are saying atmospheric rivers will get much stronger due climate change and flooding would get much worse,” said Nissen.</p> <p>“That next big earthquake could be 100 years away. That’s not even in our lifetime. It almost feels hypothetical,” he said. “The cost of doing something is astronomical. But the cost of doing nothing is even worse.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Asian, Black activists struggle to agree
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/us/black-asian-activists-policing-disagreement.html
GIST	<p>OAKLAND, Calif. — This spring, Black political leaders and civil rights activists delivered a message to Asian Americans: We stand with you.</p> <p>Asian American activists and political leaders responded in kind, publicly acknowledging the daily reality of racism faced by Black people.</p> <p>The two groups were reacting to violence aimed at their communities. That included the police killing of George Floyd last year in Minneapolis, which led to a surge in the Black Lives Matter movement. In March, a gunman killed eight people at Atlanta spas, six of whom were Asian women, amid a spree of anti-Asian attacks.</p> <p>In the aftermath, protesters wore “Black-Asian Unity” T-shirts and held #StopAsianHate rallies in cities such as Los Angeles and Chicago. The two groups, which historically have been divided by racial tensions and socioeconomic inequality, promised to cooperate to reduce violence and discrimination against people of color.</p> <p>Yet nine months later, the results of that pledge are hard to find. In interviews, nearly two dozen activists, historians and community leaders around the country said that for the most part, no major efforts have been made to build bridges between the Black and Asian communities, and talks of solidarity have petered out.</p> <p>In the spring, there was a “lot of support” for Black and Asian people to achieve change together, said JaMae Rooks, 29, a co-director of Atlanta’s Black Lives Matter chapter. “But when things died down, support, in essence, died down.”</p> <p>The reasons for the lack of unity were varied, activists said, including that the Black and Asian communities often view each other with suspicion. But the tensions boiled down to one main disagreement: policing. While Black Lives Matter activists have called for reducing police budgets and decreasing cities’ reliance on law enforcement officers, Asian leaders say that police are crucial to preventing attacks.</p> <p>The contrasting attitudes underline how drastically the relationship with law enforcement can differ depending on race. Black Americans have been disproportionately killed by the police, while Asian Americans are among the least likely to be harmed in police encounters, according to multiple studies.</p> <p>Hate crimes against Asian people rose 73 percent in 2020, according to the F.B.I. The police killed 192 Black people in the United States this year, compared with 249 last year, according to data from the Mapping Police Violence research and advocacy project.</p> <p>“There’s more criticism and more skepticism about the police among Black people than Asian Americans,” said Claire Jean Kim, a professor of political science and Asian American studies at the University of California, Irvine. Often, she said, Asian Americans see the police “as protectors of private property rather than instruments of social control.”</p>

In Atlanta, Ms. Rooks said her group had not spoken recently about anti-Asian hate, nor did she have connections with local Asian groups. In May, President Biden signed [a bill](#) aimed at combating hate crimes against Asian Americans, which may have caused some Asians to feel that they had achieved their goal, she said.

“We all come together for something major, and then we go off and do our own separate things, unfortunately,” Ms. Rooks said.

In New York City, some Asian American activists said they could not even agree among themselves on ways to address hate crimes, so working with Black people was less of a priority.

“Our problems are unique,” said Paul Mak, a community organizer who supports heavier policing in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park district, where reports of harassment against Asians peaked this spring. In June, when hordes of patrol cars camped out in the area for a week, no new reports came in, though the hate crimes re-emerged when the police left, he added.

The debate has played out across generational lines as well as racial ones, with younger activists of both races often viewing more policing as ineffective.

In New York, younger Black and Asian progressive activists argued in May that strategies like self-defense training and driving services that take Asian elders to the grocery store were more successful at countering violence than bringing in more police officers.

Lateefah Simon, the founder of the [Akonadi Foundation](#), a racial justice group in Oakland, Calif., said she had seen younger Black and Asian activists in California working to form bonds, especially through social media. But she acknowledged that progress was difficult.

“We don’t know each other in our communities, and we need to do a better job of humanizing each other and not pointing fingers,” said Ms. Simon, 44.

The divisions have been particularly striking in California, where reports of hate crimes against Asians jumped 107 percent this year from 2020, according to Rob Bonta, the state’s attorney general. More than 200 Black people have been killed by police officers in California since 2013, according to Mapping Police Violence data, including 16 this year.

In August, Carl Chan, the president of the Chinatown Chamber of Commerce in Oakland, urged Gov. Gavin Newsom to deploy California Highway Patrol members on city streets so that local officers could spend more time patrolling neighborhoods like Chinatown.

“Our seniors are afraid to walk on the streets,” said Mr. Chan, 63, who was assaulted while walking in Chinatown in April. When additional C.H.P. officers arrived in September, some Asian business owners said they felt safer, he said, and some Black business owners and religious leaders also wanted more policing.

But Cat Brooks, the co-founder of the Anti-Police Terror Project, a Black-led group, said adding more officers created a “totally oppressive environment” that was dangerous for people of color.

“For Carl Chan to be able to call in the wrath of agencies that have historically brutalized Black and brown communities is terrifying,” she said, adding that many Asian progressive groups agreed with her.

Ms. Brooks and Mr. Chan said they had not spoken.

Ms. Brooks said people of color have been pitted against one another by America’s political and legal systems. “If me and you are starving and someone, after two weeks of us starving, puts a piece of bread down on the table between the two of us, what’s going to happen?” she said. “We’re going to fight to the death for that bread.”

Black and Asian Americans have joined forces in the past. In the 1960s, the Black Panthers teamed up with the Red Guard Party to push for better living conditions in San Francisco's Chinatown. In 2014, the Asians for Black Lives movement sprang up to support Black Lives Matter.

Sometimes, though, there have been clashes. In the 1990s, Korean business owners in South Central Los Angeles wrangled with the poorer Black residents in the area. Tensions there peaked in 1992, after four police officers who had beaten Rodney King were acquitted, leading to riots. More than 2,300 Korean-owned business were looted and burned.

Dr. Kim said the uneasy relations stemmed from an inherent inequality. Because Asian people don't trace their roots in America to slavery, she said, they are often compared with white people in socioeconomic status.

In 2016, the median yearly income for Asian adults was \$51,000, similar to the \$48,000 for whites and above the \$31,000 for Black adults, according to a study by the Pew Research Center. Yet Asian people, who are not a homogeneous group, were also the nation's most economically divided group, the same study found; over the last four decades, the poorest Asians saw the least amount of income growth compared with their counterparts in other races.

As a result, Dr. Kim said, it was difficult to find common ground. "What kind of forum would have conservative, affluent Chinese immigrants talking to Black activists from a poor urban area, saying, 'We need to defund the police?'" she said.

Activists said there were advantages to getting Black and Asian communities on the same page. City leaders are often reluctant to make policing changes unless minorities present a unified front, they said.

"We've heard, 'If your community can't agree on this thing, then I'm not going to make a decision on it,'" said Alvina Wong, 33, the campaign and organizing director for the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, a progressive Oakland group.

On the front lines of this debate, even friends have sometimes disagreed.

When Mr. Chan pleaded for more C.H.P. officers in Oakland this summer, he summoned the local media to a plaza in the heart of Chinatown. Flanking him were members of a volunteer patrol team aimed at tackling crime and Loren Taylor, an Oakland City Council member who is a friend.

But when a local reporter asked Mr. Taylor, who is Black, if he had signed onto Mr. Chan's letter requesting more policing, Mr. Taylor said he had not. He was there to denounce Asian hatred, Mr. Taylor said, but was concerned about bringing in officers unfamiliar with Oakland's standards for law enforcement.

"We want to have the argument within ourselves, before we bring in others," he said in an interview.

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HEADLINE	12/18 Struggling to beat back a resurgent virus
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/world/biden-is-struggling-to-beat-back-a-resurgent-virus-once-again.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The latest surge of the coronavirus is another reminder for President Biden of how hard it is to get ahead of the pandemic.</p> <p>Vaccine effectiveness has waned in the onslaught of Delta and Omicron. A spike in demand for testing is straining the system. And masks remain a political issue across the country.</p>

Nearly a year into his presidency, Mr. Biden's promise to "shut down the virus, not the country" [remains only partly fulfilled](#). Stubborn resistance to vaccines among millions and the arrival of the fast-spreading new variant have upended the president's plans for a hopeful, end-of-the-year holiday season.

Just a week before Christmas, Mr. Biden had to offer a warning of gloom.

"We are looking at a winter of severe illness and death — if you're unvaccinated — for themselves, their families, and the hospitals they'll soon overwhelm," [Mr. Biden said at the White House on Thursday](#). "The whole point is: Omicron is here, it's going to start to spread much more rapidly in the beginning of the year, and the only real protection is to get your shots."

Issuing dire new warnings is not where Mr. Biden or his top advisers expected they would be at this point in the year.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Most world vaccines ineffective on omicron
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/health/omicron-vaccines-efficacy.html
GIST	<p>A growing body of preliminary research suggests the Covid vaccines used in most of the world offer almost no defense against becoming infected by the highly contagious Omicron variant.</p> <p>All vaccines still seem to provide a significant degree of protection against serious illness from Omicron, which is the most crucial goal. But only the Pfizer and Moderna shots, when reinforced by a booster, appear to have success at stopping infections, and these vaccines are unavailable in most of the world.</p> <p>The other shots — including those from AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson and vaccines manufactured in China and Russia — do little to nothing to stop the spread of Omicron, early research shows. And because most countries have built their inoculation programs around these vaccines, the gap could have a profound impact on the course of the pandemic.</p> <p>A global surge of infections in a world where billions of people remain unvaccinated not only threatens the health of vulnerable individuals but also increases the opportunity for the emergence of yet more variants. The disparity in the ability of countries to weather the pandemic will almost certainly deepen. And the news about limited vaccine efficacy against Omicron infection could depress demand for vaccination throughout the developing world, where many people are already hesitant or preoccupied with other health problems.</p> <p>Most evidence so far is based on laboratory experiments, which do not capture the full range of the body's immune response, and not from tracking the effect on real-world populations. The results are striking, however.</p> <p>The Pfizer and Moderna shots use the new mRNA technology, which has consistently offered the best protection against infection with every variant. All of the other vaccines are based on older methods of triggering an immune response.</p> <p>The Chinese vaccines Sinopharm and Sinovac — which make up almost half of all shots delivered globally — offer almost zero protection from Omicron infection. The great majority of people in China have received these shots, which are also widely used in low-and middle-income countries such as Mexico and Brazil.</p> <p>A preliminary effectiveness study in Britain found that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine showed no ability to stop Omicron infection six months after vaccination. Ninety percent of vaccinated people in India received this shot, under the brand name Covishield; it has also been widely used across much of sub-Saharan Africa, where Covax, the global Covid vaccine program, has distributed 67 million doses of it to 44 countries.</p>

Researchers predict that Russia's Sputnik vaccine, which is also being used in Africa and Latin America, will show similarly dismal rates of protection against Omicron.

Demand for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine had been surging in Africa, because its single-shot delivery regimen makes it easy to deliver in low-resource settings. But it too has shown a negligible ability to block Omicron infection.

Antibodies are the first line of defense induced by vaccines. But the shots also stimulate the growth of T cells, and preliminary studies suggest that these T cells [still recognize the Omicron variant](#), which is important in preventing severe disease.

"What you lose first is protection against asymptomatic mild infection, what you retain much better is protection against severe disease and death," said John Moore, a virologist at Weill Cornell Medicine in New York. He called it "a silver lining" that Omicron so far appears less lethal than the Delta variant.

But this protection will not be enough to prevent Omicron from causing global disruption, said J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for International and Strategic Studies.

"The sheer scale of infection will overwhelm health systems, simply because the denominator will be potentially so big," he said. "If you have a burst of infection worldwide, a shock, what does the world look like on other side of it? Is it, 'The war is over,' or, 'The war has just entered another phase'? We haven't begun thinking about any of that."

People with breakthrough cases may experience only asymptomatic infection or mild illness, but they can pass the virus to unvaccinated people, who could fall more severely ill, and become a source of new variants.

Dr. Seth Berkley, the chief executive of Gavi, the global vaccine alliance, said that more data was needed before drawing conclusions about vaccines' effectiveness against Omicron — and that accelerated vaccination should continue to be the focus of pandemic response.

Preliminary data from South Africa suggest that with Omicron, there is a much higher chance of people who already had Covid getting reinfected than there was with the original virus and previous variants. But some public health experts say they believe that countries that have already been through brutal waves of Covid, such as Brazil and India, may have a buffer against Omicron, and vaccination after infection produces high antibody levels.

"The combination of vaccination and exposure to the virus seems to be stronger than only having the vaccine," said Ramanan Laxminarayan, an epidemiologist in New Delhi. India, he noted, has an adult vaccination rate of only about 40 percent but 90 percent exposure to the virus in some areas.

"Without a doubt Omicron is going to flood through India," he said. "But hopefully India is protected to some extent because of vaccination and exposure."

China does not have this layer of protection to back up its weak vaccines. Because of China's aggressive efforts to stop spread of the virus within its borders, relatively few people have previous exposure. Only an estimated 7 percent of people in Wuhan, where the pandemic began, were infected.

Much of Latin America has relied on the Chinese and Russian vaccines, and on AstraZeneca. Mario Roseblatt, a professor of immunology at the University of Chile, said that more than 90 percent of Chileans had had two doses of one vaccine, but the great majority of these were Coronavac, the Sinovac shot. High vaccination coverage combined with early reports that Omicron does not cause serious illness is leading to a false sense of security in the country, he said.

"We have to get people to understand that it doesn't work like that: If you get high transmissibility you're going to have the health system saturated because the number of people getting ill will be higher," he said.

Brazil has recommended that all vaccinated people get a third dose, and it started using Pfizer's vaccine for all boosters, but only 40 percent of the vaccinated have turned up to get the extra shot. Dr. Amilcar Tanuri, a virologist at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, said with cautious optimism that the high levels of previous Covid exposure might blunt Omicron's impact but noted that the most vulnerable Brazilians, vaccinated first, got Coronavac, and tens of millions more were given AstraZeneca.

Mr. Morrison called Omicron's ability to evade the protection of vaccination "a massive setback" for low- and middle-income countries, where, far from any discussion of boosters, the focus is still on delivering first shots.

"The world gets cleaved into two parts, right?" he said. "It's those that have a quick path toward boosters versus those who have had very limited progress and suddenly they're subject to this new lashing."

Just 13 percent of people in Africa have received a least one dose of a Covid vaccine.

Dr. Laxminarayan said the Indian government, to which he is an occasional adviser, was considering booster shots, but the Delta variant still poses a significant threat in India, and two vaccine doses offers protection against Delta. That presents the government with a difficult choice between focusing on getting people who remain unvaccinated, or only partly vaccinated, to two doses, or trying to get boosters to older people and those with high-risk medical conditions as protection against Omicron.

The news that the non-mRNA vaccines offer little protection against infection from Omicron may further erode demand for shots in [countries already struggling to build demand](#), Mr. Morrison said.

"This challenges the whole value of vaccines," he said. "If you're so far behind and then you suffer this, it's going to feed anti-vaccine sentiment and weaken confidence."

Tolbert Nyenswah, a senior researcher with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said the emerging threat to countries in the global south that have relied on non-mRNA vaccines was an indictment of wealthy countries' failure to share that technology or help build [production points in low- and middle-income countries](#).

As a consequence, dangerous variants will continue to emerge from areas with low vaccination coverage and will prolong the pandemic, predicted Dr. Nyenswah, who was deputy minister of health in Liberia through that country's worst Ebola outbreak.

Dr. Berkley at Gavi said it would be a serious mistake for countries to ease up on their vaccination push or to assume that only mRNA vaccines are worth distributing.

"We may be seeing a situation where countries say, 'If developed countries don't want these vaccines, then we don't want these vaccines,'" he said. "That, of course, would be the wrong interpretation, if it turns out that these vaccines prevent against severe disease and death."

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HEADLINE	12/18 Hong Kong 'patriots only' elections
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/world/asia/hong-kong-patriots-elections.html
GIST	<p>HONG KONG — On the surface, Hong Kong's legislative election on Sunday is like any such poll the city has held, but its differences are stark. This time, candidates have been vetted by national security bodies. Several people have been arrested after calling for a boycott. Dozens of veteran pro-democracy figures, either in jail or in exile, are absent from the campaign trail.</p> <p>The election will be the first since Beijing imposed a drastic overhaul of the political system to allow only "patriots" to run, tightening the governing Communist Party's grip over the territory and leaving space only for the barest semblance of an opposition.</p>

While the rules of Hong Kong's elections were always in favor of Beijing's allies, the new system eliminates even the slightest uncertainty of previous campaigns, and the establishment's near-total control of the legislature is now guaranteed.

Still, the government is [sparing no effort](#) to show that the election is legitimate, even threatening foreign newspapers that suggest otherwise. Officials have exhorted voters to show up, but polls suggest that turnout could sink to a record low.

The opposition has been devastated by Beijing's crackdown.

The last time Hong Kong held an election, the pro-democracy camp [won a stunning victory](#), taking nearly 90 percent of the seats in the November 2019 vote for district councils. The vote, after months of antigovernment street [protests](#), was a dramatic rebuke of Beijing's authority.

The Communist Party has been determined not to see a repeat.

In January, the police arrested dozens of Hong Kong's most well-known democracy advocates, saying their election platform amounted to a subversive plot against the government. Fourteen have been granted bail, but 33 remain in custody awaiting a trial that is not expected to begin until the second half of next year. Other opposition politicians have gone into exile, fearing arrest.

Those who have remained in the city's pro-democracy parties were not participating in Sunday's election. Some said they did not want to lend legitimacy to the process. The Democratic Party, the largest opposition group, said its members had no enthusiasm to run.

The few democracy backers on the ballot have toed Beijing's line.

Only a few of all the candidates running this year have described themselves as "pro-democracy," and they share one thing in common: They observe Beijing's red lines.

They have avoided the sort of political stances that could lead to their disqualification or even imprisonment, such as calling for independence for Hong Kong or foreign sanctions against Hong Kong officials.

In Hong Kong's new electoral landscape, the absence of the mainstream opposition has resulted in an odd political twist: Such outside candidates are being given some help by Beijing's representatives and allies, who would in normal circumstances be their rivals. But the support is limited to helping them pass the rigorous nomination process to get on the ballot, not to winning votes on Election Day.

One pro-democracy candidate, Wong Sing-chi, said he believed it was important to fight for democracy by pursuing office, even if the system was flawed. If elected, he said, he would call for an amnesty for nonviolent protesters who have been sentenced to prison and a scaling back of the use of a national security law that has quashed dissent.

Mr. Wong, a former member of the Democratic Party, said he was asked twice this year by the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government, Beijing's increasingly assertive arm in the city, about whether he would run. But he said he made the decision to run on his own. After he did so, he was given a powerful boost by Lo Man-tuen, a prominent pro-Beijing voice on the election committee, who helped him secure enough nominations from the body to run.

"I am absolutely not their cup of tea, but they also want me to run so there will be some other voices," said Mr. Wong.

Adrian Lau, who won a seat on the district councils during a pro-democracy wave in 2019, said he was running for the legislative council because some voters did not have faith in pro-Beijing politicians.

"They need at least one or two Legco members who would really help them," he said.

Turnout is expected to be low, but Hong Kong's leader says it's OK.

With the establishment's control of the legislative council a foregone conclusion, the biggest question in this race is whether the voters will turn out. That has emerged as something of an informal referendum on the new electoral system.

"Low voter turnout is clearly an indicator of Hong Kong society that is deeply divided," said Sonny Lo, a Hong Kong political analyst. "The political wounds from the 2019 protests were deep and the scars still remain."

The government has been aggressive in encouraging voters to participate, setting up polling stations at the border with mainland China for Hong Kong residents who want to vote without going through quarantine. Top government officers have called on citizens to turn out.

But Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's chief executive, has argued that a low number of voters could be a sign of satisfaction with the government.

"There is a saying that when the government is doing well and its credibility is high, the voter turnout will decrease because the people do not have a strong demand to choose different lawmakers to supervise the government," she told Global Times, a newspaper controlled by the Communist Party of China. "Therefore, I think the turnout rate does not mean anything."

Regina Ip, a pro-Beijing lawmaker and government adviser, criticized the logic of Mrs. Lam's analysis, noting that in the 2019 district council election, a record number of voters had turned out.

"Does that reflect a failure of her governance?" [Mrs. Ip said at an election forum](#) hosted by The South China Morning Post, a local newspaper. "If we pursue her argument to the logical end, one would draw that conclusion."

The mere mention of boycotts has been met with arrests and threats.

The police have arrested at least 10 people, accusing them of encouraging people to not participate in the election or cast spoiled ballots.

Hong Kong courts have issued warrants for at least seven activists and politicians who now live overseas, including the former lawmakers Ted Hui and Nathan Law. Mr. Law, who is in Britain, is accused of making a speech at a web conference on Dec. 3 in which he urged voters to ignore the election. Mr. Hui, who is in Australia, urged voters to cast blank ballots.

The Hong Kong authorities also warned The Wall Street Journal that it may have broken the law with a November editorial that called the election a "sham vote." The newspaper had said that "boycotts and blank ballots are one of the last ways for Hong Kongers to express their political views." The government sent a similar warning letter to The Sunday Times of London over an article titled, "China shows its true colours — and they're not pretty."

The head of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption, which enforces the election law, warned that survey results from a prominent polling organization about potential turnout might also be illegal.

The organization, the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, had been attacked by government supporters after a recent survey showed that about 50 percent of respondents planned to vote in the election, the lowest-ever figure since the institute started asking the question in the early 1990s.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Russia demands new security deal w/NATO
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/world/europe/russia-nato-security-deal.html

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia demanded on Friday that the United States and its allies halt all military activity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia in a sweeping proposal that would establish a Cold War-like security arrangement, posing a challenge to diplomatic efforts to defuse Russia's growing military threat to Ukraine.

The Russian proposal — immediately dismissed by NATO officials — came in the form of a draft treaty suggesting NATO should offer written guarantees that it would not expand farther east toward Russia and halt all military activities in the former Soviet republics, a vast swath of now-independent states extending from Eastern Europe to Central Asia.

The proposals codified a series of demands floated in various forms in recent weeks by Russian officials, including by President Vladimir V. Putin in a video call with President Biden. They represent in startling clarity goals long sought by Mr. Putin, who analysts say is growing increasingly concerned that Ukraine is drifting irretrievably into a Western orbit, posing a grave threat to Russian security.

The demands also reinforced the notion that Mr. Putin seemed willing to take ever-greater risks to force the West to take Russian security concerns seriously and to address historical grievances largely ignored for decades.

Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei A. Ryabkov, laid out details about the proposal in public for the first time on Friday in a video news conference in Moscow, amid a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine's border that Western officials have interpreted as a threat of an invasion.

The demands went far beyond the current conflict between Ukrainian government forces and Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. And most were directed not at Ukraine, which is threatened by the troop buildup, but at the United States and Ukraine's other Western allies.

They included a request for a NATO commitment that it would not offer membership to Ukraine specifically. But NATO officials emphasized that NATO countries will not rule out future membership for any Eastern European countries, including Ukraine.

The proposal highlighted starkly differing views in the United States and Russia on the military tensions over Ukraine. Russia has insisted that the West has been fomenting the crisis by instilling anti-Russia sentiment in Ukraine, and by providing weapons. Mr. Ryabkov cast the confrontation in Ukraine as a critical threat to Russia's security.

The United States and European allies, in contrast, say Russia provoked the security crisis by recently deploying tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine's border.

NATO officials said on Friday that Russia's proposals were unacceptable in their demands for veto power over now-independent countries. They emphasized their openness to a diplomatic dialogue on Russia's security concerns, but said that any discussion would also include NATO's security concerns about Russian missile deployments, satellite tests and disinformation efforts.

The officials also suggested that if Russia did make a major new military incursion into Ukraine, as it seems to be planning, NATO would strongly consider moving more troops into allied countries bordering Ukraine, like Poland and the Baltic countries, because the "strategic depth" against Russia that Ukraine now provides would be damaged or lost.

Jake Sullivan, President Biden's national security adviser, said in Washington on Friday that while the Russians had a list of security concerns, so did the United States and its European allies, and that Washington was willing to negotiate on that basis.

"We've had a dialogue with Russia on European security issues for the last 20 years," Mr. Sullivan told an audience at the Council on Foreign Relations. "We had it with the Soviet Union for decades before that."

That process “has sometimes produced progress, sometimes produced deadlock,” he said, noting that the United States planned “to put on the table our concern with Russian activities that we believe harm our interests and values.”

“It’s very difficult to see agreements getting consummated,” he added, “if we’re continuing to see an escalatory cycle.”

He declined to say if the United States was willing to provide Ukraine with more powerful defensive weapons, saying a \$450 million arms and security package is already in place. He said the pipeline was already so full there is a question of “absorptive capacity.”

The Russian proposal took the form of two draft treaties, one with NATO and the other with the United States.

“Member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization accept the obligation to exclude farther expansion of NATO to Ukraine and other states,” the text suggested. In demanding the written guarantee from NATO, Mr. Putin and other Russian officials have reached into early post-Cold War history, describing what they see as a betrayal by the West in 1990.

They assert that NATO expanded to the east despite a spoken assurance from James Baker, then the secretary of state, to the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, that it would not.

The agreement was never put in writing and Mr. Baker said later that Russian officials misinterpreted his comment, which applied only to the territory of the former East Germany. Mr. Gorbachev has, in interviews, confirmed that spoken assurance came in discussions only of East Germany.

The new Russian proposal surfaced other historical grievances.

It demanded that NATO withdraw military infrastructure placed in Eastern European states after 1997, the date of an accord signed between Russia and NATO that Moscow wants now as a starting point for a new security treaty.

The Russian Foreign Ministry had earlier demanded that NATO officially abrogate a 2008 promise, known as the Bucharest Declaration, that Ukraine and Georgia would be welcomed into the alliance. The [NATO chief invoked that declaration after the meeting with Ukraine’s president](#), Volodymyr Zelensky, on Thursday, saying the offer still stands.

Russia is also insisting that NATO countries do not deploy offensive weapons in states neighboring Russia, including countries not in the alliance — a reference to Ukraine. And the proposal suggested a ban on military exercises at strengths of more than a brigade in a zone along both sides of Russia’s western border, an issue that would address the current military buildup near Ukraine.

Analysts expressed concerns about the Russian demands, saying they appeared to set up any talks between Russia and the West on these “security guarantees” for failure, possibly paving the way for a war in Ukraine.

But they might also represent an opening position, with Russia willing to later compromise in talks. That the demands were put forth by the deputy foreign minister, Mr. Ryabkov, and not by his boss, Sergey V. Lavrov, or by Mr. Putin himself, left wiggle room, analysts said.

“There is a lot of shadow boxing going on, on all sides, and it’s not clear how this ends,” said Samuel Greene, a professor of Russian politics at King’s College in London. “This whole situation is ambiguous by design.”

Analysts pointed out that Mr. Putin had tried to extract similar concessions from President Trump but failed.

Mr. Greene said Russia may now see an opening to renegotiate the post-Soviet security landscape while Ukraine is still weak but likely to become stronger, Western nations are distracted by the pandemic and other problems and the U.S. is more concerned with the Chinese threat to Taiwan.

Putting forward impossible demands was intended to complicate diplomacy over the Russian buildup on the Ukrainian border, said Samuel Charap, a Russian security analyst at the RAND Corporation. “Diplomacy requires compromise and flexibility,” he said. “It usually entails avoiding public ultimatums. Basically, this is not diplomacy. It’s the opposite of diplomacy.”

Mr. Ryabkov, the Russian diplomat, said Moscow was open to “reasonable” compromises. But he also suggested the Kremlin has assessed the United States’ power as waning and that a new accord is justified.

Analysts say that negotiating such wide-ranging new security accommodations would most likely take many months, if they can be accomplished at all. Mr. Putin may have to decide at an earlier moment whether to go ahead with an invasion because the troops garrisoned now at temporary sites near the Ukrainian border cannot remain there indefinitely.

Ukrainian officials have suggested that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August helped precipitate the crisis by signaling waning American resolve for overseas commitments, which emboldened the Kremlin.

The Biden administration has vowed to remain engaged in the international arena and said it intended to repair relationships strained under President Trump. American officials have consistently said they are committed to supporting Ukrainian sovereignty.

Mr. Putin has come close to openly acknowledging that he is using military force to coerce the West to negotiate, though his spokesman has denied this. Mr. Putin has said Western countries were realizing Russia was serious about defending “red lines” related to NATO forces near its borders.

“Our recent warnings have indeed been heard and are having a certain effect,” he told a gathering of Russian diplomats in November. “Tensions have risen.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 Israel officials cast doubt for attack on Iran
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/world/middleeast/israel-iran-nuclear-attack.html
GIST	<p>TEL AVIV — With diplomatic efforts to curb Iran’s nuclear program teetering, Israel’s defense minister has ordered his forces to prepare a military option, warning the world that Israel would take matters into its own hands if a new nuclear agreement did not sufficiently constrain Iran.</p> <p>But several current and former senior Israeli military officials and experts say that Israel lacks the ability to pull off an assault that could destroy, or even significantly delay, Iran’s nuclear program, at least not anytime soon. One current high-ranking security official said it would take at least two years to prepare an attack that could cause significant damage to Iran’s nuclear project.</p> <p>A smaller-scale strike, damaging parts of the program without ending it entirely, would be feasible sooner, experts and officials say. But a wider effort to destroy the dozens of nuclear sites in distant parts of Iran — the kind of attack Israeli officials have threatened — would be beyond the current resources of the Israeli armed forces.</p> <p>“It’s very difficult — I would say even impossible — to launch a campaign that would take care of all these sites,” said Relik Shafir, a retired Israeli Air Force general who was a pilot in a 1981 strike on an Iraqi nuclear facility.</p> <p>“In the world we live in, the only air force that can maintain a campaign is the U.S. Air Force,” he said.</p>

The recent discussion of a military attack on Iran is part of an Israeli pressure campaign to make sure that the countries negotiating with Iran in Vienna do not agree to what Israeli officials consider “a bad deal,” one that in their view would not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

At the moment, there appears to be little chance of that as the talks, aimed at resurrecting the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, [have only regressed](#) since Iran’s new hard-line government rejoined them last month. Until now, Israel has tried to curb Iran’s nuclear program, which it considers an existential threat, through a combination of aggressive diplomacy and clandestine attacks. Israeli officials considered it a coup when they were able to persuade President Donald J. Trump to withdraw from the 2015 agreement, which President Biden now wants to salvage.

Israel has also waged a shadow war through espionage, targeted [assassinations](#), [sabotage](#) and [cyberattacks](#) — smaller-scale operations that it has never formally claimed. Israel secretly considered [mounting full-scale airstrikes in 2012](#) before abandoning the plan.

But as Iran’s nuclear enrichment program approaches weapons-grade levels, Israeli politicians have warned in increasingly open fashion what the world has long assumed: that Israel could turn to open warfare if Iran was allowed to make progress toward developing a nuclear weapon, a goal Iran denies.

In September, the head of the Israeli armed forces, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, said large parts of a military budget increase had been allocated to preparing a strike on Iran. Early this month, the Mossad chief, David Barnea, said Israel would do “whatever it takes” to stop Iran from making a nuclear bomb.

This month, during a visit to the United States, Defense Minister Benny Gantz publicly announced that he had ordered the Israeli Army to prepare for a possible military strike on Iran.

But Israeli experts and military officials say that Israel currently lacks the ability to deal Iran’s nuclear program a knockout blow by air.

Iran has dozens of nuclear sites, some deep underground that would be hard for Israeli bombs to quickly penetrate and destroy, Mr. Shafir said. The Israeli Air Force does not have warplanes large enough to carry the latest bunker-busting bombs, so the more protected sites would have to be struck repeatedly with less effective missiles, a process that might take days or even weeks, Mr. Shafir added.

One current senior security official said Israel did not currently have the ability to inflict any significant damage to the underground facilities at Natanz and Fordow.

Such an effort would be complicated by [a shortage of refueling planes](#). The ability to refuel is crucial for a bomber that may have to travel more than 2,000 miles round trip, crossing over Arab countries that would not want to be a refueling stop for an Israeli strike.

Israel has ordered eight new [KC-46 tankers from Boeing](#) at a cost of \$2.4 billion but the aircraft are back-ordered and Israel is unlikely to receive even one before late 2024.

Aside from the ability to hit the targets, Israel would have to simultaneously fend off Iranian fighter jets and air-defense systems.

Any attack on Iran would also likely set off retaliatory attacks from Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, allies of Iran that would try to force Israel to fight a war on several fronts simultaneously.

Iran’s defense capabilities are also much stronger than in 2012, when Israel last seriously considered attacking. Its nuclear sites are better fortified, and it has more surface-to-surface missiles that can be launched swiftly from tunnels.

“It is very possible that when the Israeli planes try to land back in Israel, they will find that the Iranian missiles destroyed their runways,” said Tal Inbar, an aviation expert and former head of the Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies, an aviation-focused research group.

Other military experts, however, say that Israel could still take out the most important elements of the Iranian nuclear apparatus, even without newer aircraft and equipment.

“It’s always good to replace a car from 1960 with a brand-new car from 2022,” said Amos Yadlin, a former air force general who also participated in the 1981 strike. “But we have refueling capabilities. We have bunker busters. We have one of the best air forces in the world. We have very good intelligence on Iran. We can do it.

“Can the American Air Force can do it better? Definitely. They have a much more capable air force. But they don’t have the will.”

He cautioned that he would only support a strike as a last resort.

Israeli officials refuse to discuss the red lines Iran must cross to warrant a military strike. However, a senior defense official said that if Iran were to begin enriching uranium to 90 percent purity, weapons-grade fuel, Israel would be obliged to intensify its actions. American officials have said Iran is currently enriching uranium up to 60 percent purity.

The fact that it could take years to ramp up a program to carry out a massive air campaign against Iran should come as no surprise to Israeli military officials. When Israel considered such an attack in 2012, the preparations for it had taken more than three years, Israeli officials said.

But the distance between the current government’s threats and its ability to carry them out has provoked criticism of the former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who led Israel’s government until last June and was a dogged advocate for a harsher approach to Iran.

Since 2015, training for a strike on Iran had slowed, a senior Israeli military official said, as the defense establishment focused on confrontations with militias in Lebanon, Syria and Gaza.

In 2017, the Israeli Air Force determined it needed to replace its refueling planes, but Mr. Netanyahu’s government did not order them until last March.

And another senior military official said the army had asked Mr. Netanyahu since 2019 for extra funds to improve Israel’s ability to attack Iran, but was rebuffed.

In a statement, Mr. Netanyahu’s office said the opposite was true, that it was Mr. Netanyahu who pushed for more resources and energy on a strike on Iran while the military chiefs insisted on spending most of their budget on other issues and slowed down preparations to strike Iran.

“Were it not for the political, operational and budgetary actions led by Prime Minister Netanyahu over the past decade, Iran would have long had an arsenal of nuclear weapons,” the statement added.

Whether or not Mr. Netanyahu restricted the funding, experts have said that the money under discussion would not have significantly changed the army’s ability to attack Iran.

“You can always improve — buying more refueling airplanes, newer ones, bigger loads of fuel,” Mr. Shafir said. But even with these improvements and a superior air force, he said, Israeli airstrikes would not end Iran’s nuclear program.

They would likely, however, set the region on fire.

HEADLINE	12/17 Doctors, nurses 'living in constant crisis'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/us/covid-hospitals-omicron.html?
GIST	<p>SAGINAW, Mich. — On the top floor of the hospital, in the unit that houses the sickest Covid-19 patients, 13 of the 14 beds were occupied. In the one empty room, a person had just died.</p> <p>Through surge after surge, caregivers in the unit at Covenant HealthCare in Saginaw, Mich., have helped ailing patients say goodbye to their relatives on video calls. The medical workers have cried in the dimly lit hallways. They have seen caseloads wane, only to watch beds fill up again. Mostly, they have learned to fear the worst.</p> <p>“You come back to work and you ask who died,” said Bridget Klingenberg, an intensive care nurse at Covenant, where staff levels are so strained that the Defense Department recently sent reinforcements. “I don’t think people understand the toll that that takes unless you’ve actually done it.”</p> <p>The highly contagious Omicron variant arrives in the United States at a moment when there is little capacity left in hospitals, especially in the Midwest and Northeast, where case rates are the highest, and where many health care workers are still contending with the Delta variant. Some researchers are hopeful that Omicron may cause less severe disease than Delta, but health officials still worry that the new variant could send a medical system already under pressure to the breaking point.</p> <p>About 1,300 Americans are dying from the coronavirus each day. The national case, death and hospitalization rates remain well below those seen last winter, before vaccines were widely available. But suddenly, positive tests are growing. State officials in New York reported more than 20,000 coronavirus cases on Friday, which they said was more than on any other day of the pandemic. In Connecticut and Maine, reports of new infections have grown by around 150 percent in the last two weeks. In Ohio and Indiana, hospitalization rates are approaching those seen during last winter’s devastating wave.</p> <p>“Living in a constant crisis for 20 months-plus is a little overwhelming,” said Dr. Matthew Deibel, the medical director for emergency care at Covenant, where patients must sometimes wait hours to be seen because of a shortage of beds and staff.</p> <p>With coronavirus hospitalizations increasing 20 percent nationally over the last two weeks, to 68,000 people, doctors and nurses are speaking with renewed alarm about conditions and pleading with people to get vaccinated.</p> <p>Last week, Omicron accounted for 2.9 percent of cases across the country, up from 0.4 percent the previous week, according to projections released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Across New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, health authorities estimated that Omicron infections were already accounting for 13.1 percent of new cases.</p> <p>In Minnesota, several hospital systems released a joint message saying that employees were demoralized and that “your access to health care is being seriously threatened” by the pandemic. In Rhode Island, Gov. Dan McKee wrote a letter to federal officials asking for staffing help, noting that “hospitals are reporting that their emergency departments are at capacity and that patients are leaving without being evaluated.” In Nebraska, a hospital released a video showing a nurse fielding three requests to care for critically ill virus patients, but having beds for only two of them. On Friday, Gov. Mike DeWine of Ohio mobilized more than 1,000 National Guard members to help with hospital staffing.</p> <p>The outlook is especially troubling in Michigan, which has the highest coronavirus hospitalization rate in the country. About 4,700 virus patients were hospitalized statewide this week, more than had been recorded during the state’s three previous spikes. And though daily case reports have dropped slightly from the record highs seen before Thanksgiving, more than 6,500 people in Michigan continue to test positive for the virus each day.</p> <p>At Covenant, there are fewer coronavirus patients than last winter, but limited staffing and a return of patients who delayed care for chronic issues during the pandemic have diminished resources.</p>

Earlier this week, about 100 patients in the sprawling hospital had active or recently resolved coronavirus infections. Of the 68 patients whose infections were still active, about 70 percent were unvaccinated, hospital officials said. Among the vaccinated patients, only two had received a booster shot.

With Omicron, [breakthrough infections are common](#), but scientists believe that the vaccines will still provide protection against the worst outcomes. Booster doses are likely to provide additional protection against infection, preliminary data suggests.

In Saginaw, doctors and nurses said they have noticed colleagues struggling with the relentless nature of the pandemic — with fatigue, short tempers, post-traumatic stress, and with frustration toward the unvaccinated.

A handful of states led by Democrats have reimposed some restrictions in recent days, including new mask rules in California and New York. But in many places, normal life continues and there appears to be limited appetite for new restrictions, even if cases rise.

Some school districts have dropped mask mandates in recent days, and federal officials expect Christmas air travel to approach prepandemic levels. Unlike last year, few health directors have told people, especially those who are vaccinated, to skip holiday gatherings.

Around Saginaw, a city of about 44,000 residents that is 90 minutes north of Detroit, medical workers said it could sometimes feel that their neighbors have overlooked the pandemic. Mask usage is spotty. Large events have resumed. In Saginaw County, about 50 percent of people are considered fully vaccinated, a figure that does not include booster shots. That rate is below Michigan's average, which is below the national rate of 61 percent.

If people saw what they did every day, many workers in Covenant's Covid ward said, they might behave differently.

"Unless you are up in that unit working side by side with me seeing the true devastation of the virus and what it physically does to the human body, how can you appreciate it? How?" said Jamie Vinson-Hunter, a respiratory therapist.

It was almost exactly a year ago when doctors and nurses at Covenant and other hospitals were among the first people to get a coronavirus vaccine. For many of them, it was a moment of optimism when it seemed that the emergency response to the coronavirus might soon end. For a time, it seemed possible: For one day in June, there were no patients at Covenant with active coronavirus infections.

Since then, the picture has worsened significantly. The immunity from those first vaccines may be on the wane. While recent data on breakthrough cases and deaths for all Americans is not readily available, recent federal data from nursing homes shows a sharp uptick in cases among people who were fully vaccinated but had not yet gotten a booster shot.

To see how far things have devolved in Saginaw, one needs only to spend time on the seventh floor of Covenant. There, in a slender hallway with a low ceiling, nurses buzz in and out of rooms. The floor is busy but not panicky, with the whirring and beeping of machines making up most of the soundtrack. Many of the sick are sedated and on ventilators, unable to speak with their doctors. Others are confused.

"This illness is dehumanizing," said Dr. Amjad Nader, who cares for people in that unit. He added, "Sometimes I don't see light in the eyes of my patients."

Many of the caregivers on that floor have become virus experts. They talk about the satisfaction of calling a patient's spouse if the patient no longer needs a ventilator after weeks of treatment. They lament the frustration of having no cure. They grieve every time they lose a patient.

Ms. Klingenberg, the nurse, volunteered to work with coronavirus patients at the start of the pandemic and has passed up opportunities to take other assignments.

“Mostly, it’s for my co-workers,” she said. “I don’t want to quit on them. And somebody has to do it. And we’re apparently the people who have chosen to do it.”

But the pandemic was not something she could leave at work. Family members tested positive. Early this year, when Ms. Klingenberg was 26 weeks pregnant, she tested positive too.

Unlike most women in their 20s, she had a severe case and was hospitalized at the University of Michigan. For a time, she faced the possibility of intubation. Then, after about a week, she started to improve. She was able to go home. Her baby was healthy and did not have to be delivered early.

The experience and the fear, she said, now helps her connect with her patients getting the same breathing treatments she received months ago.

“They have these moments of distress because this mass is strapped onto you, you can’t take it off, it’s pushing air into your lungs,” Ms. Klingenberg said. “Your natural reaction is to fight against that. So I can help, I feel like, calm them down and tell them exactly: ‘I understand what this feels like. I know exactly what you’re going through.’”

At other moments, she said, the trauma and the relentlessness of the pandemic — wave after wave — feel like too much.

“I’ll be taking care of these patients and all of a sudden I’ll be right back at U. of M., and I get flashbacks sometimes,” she said. “So I’m still trying to heal from that almost-near-death experience. And then I came right back to Covid, which was my choice. But it’s a little scary.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 Court reinstates business vaccine mandate
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/business/osha-vaccine-mandate.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>A federal appeals panel on Friday reinstated a Biden administration rule requiring larger companies to mandate that their workers get vaccinated against the coronavirus or submit to weekly testing by early January.</p> <p>The decision, by a split three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in Cincinnati, overturned a ruling last month by its counterpart in New Orleans, the Fifth Circuit, that had blocked the government from carrying out the rule.</p> <p>The contested rule, issued by the Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, has faced a wave of lawsuits from businesses and Republican-controlled states. Several challengers immediately said they planned to file or already had filed emergency motions with the Supreme Court to block the rule.</p> <p>“The record establishes that Covid-19 has continued to spread, mutate, kill and block the safe return of American workers to their jobs,” wrote Judge Jane B. Stranch. “To protect workers, OSHA can and must be able to respond to dangers as they evolve.”</p> <p>The White House welcomed the decision.</p> <p>“The OSHA vaccination or testing rule will ensure businesses enact measures that will protect their employees,” Kevin Munoz, a White House spokesman, said in a statement. “Especially as the U.S. faces the highly transmissible Omicron variant, it’s critical we move forward with vaccination requirements and protections for workers with the urgency needed in this moment.”</p>

The National Retail Federation, one of the trade groups [suing against the mandate](#), said it would “consider additional legal options. We will also continue to prepare our members to comply with this onerous mandate.”

President Biden announced in September that his administration would develop the rule as one of several steps to try to increase immunization rates and curtail the pandemic, which [has killed more than 800,000 Americans so far](#). Other mandates applied to federal employees and federal contractors.

The rule for large employers, which [OSHA issued last month](#), forces such companies to require vaccinations by Jan. 4 and to require unvaccinated employees to wear masks indoors.

Employers also are allowed to give their workers the option to be tested weekly instead of getting the vaccine, though they are not required to do so unless the worker has an exemption for medical or religious reasons. The rule makes an exception for employees who do not come into close contact with other people at their jobs, such as those who work at home or exclusively outdoors.

The administration estimated that 22 million people would get vaccinated and that 250,000 hospitalizations would be prevented because of the rule, which applies to more than 84 million workers.

Under a 1970 law, OSHA has the authority to pass a so-called emergency temporary standard, imposing new rules for workplace safety, provided it can show that workers are exposed to a “grave danger” and that the rule is necessary.

The Fifth Circuit panel ruled last month that the agency had exceeded that authority, blocking the government from carrying out the mandate. But the case was then [reassigned to the Sixth Circuit](#), which was randomly chosen to consolidate numerous challenges against the rule that had been filed around the country.

In dissolving the Fifth Circuit’s block on Friday, the majority of the Sixth Circuit panel said that the agency had sufficiently demonstrated that measures against the coronavirus pandemic meet the standard laid out by Congress in the 1970 law that created the agency.

“OSHA has demonstrated the pervasive danger that Covid-19 poses to workers — unvaccinated workers in particular — in their workplaces,” Judge Stranch wrote, adding that the possibility of new variants cited by the agency when it issued the rule “has borne out with the Omicron variant.”

The majority opinion also rejected a constitutional challenge to the rule.

Judge Stranch, an Obama appointee, was joined by Judge Julia Smith Gibbons, who was appointed by President George W. Bush. In a brief concurring opinion, Judge Gibbons signaled that as a matter of judicial restraint the courts should defer to OSHA’s expertise.

“Reasonable minds may disagree on OSHA’s approach to the pandemic, but we do not substitute our judgment for that of OSHA, which has been tasked by Congress with policymaking responsibilities,” she wrote, adding: “Beyond constitutional limitations, the work of an agency, often scientific and technical in nature, is outside our expertise.”

But Judge Joan L. Larsen, a Trump appointee, dissented, arguing — as had the Fifth Circuit panel before her — that the agency had exceeded its legal authority.

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HEADLINE	12/18 Large business vaccine deadline delay
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/18/world/covid-omicron-vaccines-delta#vaccine-mandate-deadline

GIST	<p>The Labor Department said on Saturday that it would delay until Feb. 9 the deadline for full enforcement of its rule requiring large companies to have their workers get coronavirus vaccines or be tested weekly, after weeks of legal battles created uncertainty and confusion for employers.</p> <p>The department's move came a day after a federal appeals panel reinstated the Biden administration's rule requiring that companies with at least 100 employees mandate their workers be vaccinated against the coronavirus or face weekly testing by Jan. 4. The rule had also mandated that those employers require masks for unvaccinated workers by Dec. 5.</p> <p>The decision on Friday, by a split three-judge panel of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in Cincinnati, overturned a ruling by its counterpart in New Orleans, the Fifth Circuit, that had blocked the rule last month.</p> <p>The government had argued that its vaccine mandate was well within the authority of the Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, to pass an emergency temporary standard, so long as it could show that workers were exposed to a "grave danger" and that the rule was necessary.</p> <p>Several of the many plaintiffs who have challenged that rule immediately asked the Supreme Court to intervene as part of its "emergency" docket. Appeals from the Sixth Circuit are assigned to be reviewed by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who under Supreme Court rules can, in theory, make a decision on his own but is more likely to refer the matter to the full Supreme Court for consideration.</p> <p>The Labor Department said in a statement on Saturday that it would "not issue citations for noncompliance" with any requirements of the rule before Jan. 10. It said it would not issue citations for noncompliance with the standard's testing requirements before Feb. 9, "so long as an employer is exercising reasonable, good faith efforts to come into compliance with the standard."</p> <p>While the Biden administration has encouraged companies to move forward with carrying out the rule despite the legal uncertainty, many have held off until the matter has been fully addressed by the court. Trade groups, including the National Retail Federation, have pushed for a delay in the requirements.</p> <p>Companies that fail to comply with the rule may be fined. An OSHA penalty is typically \$13,653 for every serious violation, but can be up to 10 times that amount if OSHA determines that the violation is willful or repeated. OSHA has a whistle-blower system that allows workers to report violations of its rules, though labor lawyers said that it has historically tended to not have enough inspectors.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Southeast Asia tourism reopens to very few
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/18/world/covid-omicron-vaccines-delta#southeast-asian-tourism-covid
GIST	<p>Indonesia reopened the island of Bali to fully vaccinated tourists from 19 countries in October. But only two foreign nationals arrived that month — both by sea — and its airport is not yet receiving international flights.</p> <p>Bali, one of the world's most popular destinations, is among several tourism hot spots in Southeast Asia that have reopened — technically, at least — to international visitors in recent weeks. For local hotels, tour operators and other businesses whose income was obliterated during the early part of the pandemic, the news originally brought a smidgen of hope that 2021 might end on a positive note.</p> <p>But traveling to these destinations from other countries is such an undertaking — amid rules, fees, a lack of flights and lingering uncertainty around new outbreaks — that very few people have bothered.</p> <p>"For all but the most determined, it's a pretty convoluted process to plan a short holiday," Stuart McDonald, a co-founder of Travelfish.org, a guide to Southeast Asia, said of international travelers who want to vacation in the region.</p>

“There will be determined people who figure it out,” added Mr. McDonald, who lives in Bali. “But for anything at scale, we’ve got a while to wait yet.”

Bali, where tourism accounted for more than half of the prepandemic economy, had more than six million international arrivals in 2019. But so far this year, the figure is just 45, said Dayu Indah, the head of the marketing division at the island’s official tourism office. All of those travelers arrived by sea at Benoa Port, down the road from the international airport.

“Where they come from I don’t know,” Ms. Indah said. “Whether they are tourists or expats, I have no details.”

Recent arrival numbers at other Southeast Asian tourist hot spots are not quite as extreme, but they are still miserable by prepandemic standards.

In Malaysia, only a few hundred foreign tourists have [visited the resort island of Langkawi](#) since the government partially opened it to visitors this fall — far fewer than the thousands that a local development authority had anticipated.

In Thailand, [more than 100,000 foreign visitors](#) arrived in November as part of a quarantine-free entry program for [fully vaccinated tourists](#) from dozens of countries. But the country’s total arrival figure for the year — less than 270,000 — is still a tiny fraction of the 40 million who came in 2019.

In Vietnam, foreign tourists began [trickling in by the dozens](#) under pilot programs in November, but such numbers are nowhere near the 1.8 million international arrivals that the country recorded in November 2019, [according to official data](#). The programs were started before the Omicron variant was discovered and the country’s case numbers hit a new high.

Part of the problem for Southeast Asia’s tourism industry is that China, a major source of visitors, has [imposed so many restrictions](#) on its citizens who travel overseas — including a 14-day quarantine when they return — that [very few of them are leaving](#).

Another problem is a lack of direct flights. Cambodia, for example, [reopened to international travelers last month](#) and has waived quarantine for those who are fully vaccinated and submit to testing. But most travelers from outside Asia who want to visit the country would need to transit through aviation hubs elsewhere in the region, such as Malaysia, Mr. McDonald said. That means additional Covid screenings.

“It’s just too complicated,” he said. “You get stuck in quarantine and you test positive. Who wants to have a holiday like that?”

As for Bali, the reasons not to visit include not only a lack of direct international flights, but also Indonesia’s 10-day quarantine for fully vaccinated people and the paperwork required to secure a business visa. (Tourist visas have been suspended.)

Ms. Indah said that Bali’s focus for now was on domestic tourists, and that 12,000 of them arrived by air last weekend.

The island has prepared as much as possible for a resumption of international tourism, she added. More than 90 percent of residents have been fully vaccinated, and more than 2,000 facilities have passed a Covid-specific health and safety inspection.

“But if we talk about opening borders, opening the country, the authority is with the central government, and that’s not easy, I’m sorry to say,” she said. “There are many considerations to consider.”

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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/18/world/covid-omicron-vaccines-delta#london-major-incident
GIST	<p>With hospitalizations and a rapid rise in new coronavirus cases being driven by a surge of the Omicron variant, London's mayor on Saturday declared a "major incident" — or emergency — for the first time since January.</p> <p>The declaration sets up special coordination procedures and indicates that emergency services and hospitals cannot guarantee their normal level of response.</p> <p>The move came as the number of patients in London hospitals increased 29 percent over the last week. The city has confirmed 65,525 new cases in the last week and 26,418 cases in the last day, the highest number since the start of the pandemic, Mayor Sadiq Khan's office said in a statement on Saturday. The Greater London area has seen cases rise by nearly 200 percent over the last two weeks, making it the hardest hit area of Britain.</p> <p>"It's really important that Londoners understand how serious things are," Mr. Khan said in a video posted by The Telegraph. "The best thing Londoners can do is get both vaccines and the booster. They provide extra layers of protection."</p> <p>The "really bad news," he added, was that "the vast, vast majority" of those hospitalized are unvaccinated.</p> <p>British health officials warned this week that the Omicron variant was doubling at a rate of less than every two days in parts of the country. While the effect on hospitalizations and mortality rates remained unclear, the National Health Service was likely to face a deluge of patients because of the explosive growth in cases, Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer for England, said this week.</p> <p>"It is moving at an absolutely phenomenal pace," he said.</p> <p>Countries around Europe are clamping down to push back against the spread of the Omicron variant. The Netherlands announced a full lockdown, Denmark closed theaters and concert halls, and Ireland instituted an 8 p.m. curfew for pubs.</p> <p>In Britain, the surge of the virus has put intense pressure on political officials. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been under fire in recent weeks after reports that his staff held holiday gatherings at Downing Street last year at a time when the government was instructing people not to meet with friends and family.</p> <p>In London, Mr. Khan is trying to overcome vaccine hesitancy. On Saturday, he visited a mass-vaccination pop-up clinic and announced a series of virtual events to encourage Londoners to get vaccinated.</p> <p>The mayor's office said that London's Black and Asian communities, along with low-income residents, had been hurt disproportionately by the pandemic. These communities, Black Londoners in particular, the office said, had also been targeted by vaccine misinformation.</p> <p>More than 2.5 million booster doses have been given in London, but more than a million eligible residents have yet to receive a single dose, the mayor's office said.</p> <p>Mr. Khan last declared a major incident in January when a peak in Covid-19 cases was taking a toll on the N.H.S. He also made the same declaration for a tram derailment in 2016, the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and a terrorist attack near London Bridge in 2019.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Omicron spreads; Netherlands locks down
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/18/world/covid-omicron-vaccines-delta#the-netherlands-locks-down-in-europes-strongest-reaction-to-omicron-so-far

Nations across Europe have been tightening restrictions to prevent the spread from the Omicron variant, and on Saturday, the Netherlands became the first European country to [announce](#) a full lockdown to fight the variant.

Dutch leaders ordered the closing of all nonessential shops, bars, restaurants, gyms, outdoor sports, cultural venues and schools from Sunday until mid-January.

“It’s terrible,” Prime Minister Mark Rutte acknowledged Saturday at a televised news conference. “This is terrible for everyone, especially on the eve of the holidays.”

Mr. Rutte said that a fifth wave of the virus was inevitable because of Omicron. “We have to act now to prevent a worst-case scenario,” he said. “Without measures, we could be witnessing an uncontrollable situation at the start of January.”

The Netherlands, normally a well-organized country, has [struggled](#) more than many other wealthy nations to control the virus, and its booster campaign has been relatively slow.

The health minister, Hugo de Jonge, said that efforts to mass-administer booster shots would be drastically increased. “We need this to buy time in order to find out how sick the Omicron variant can make us,” he said. Researchers are racing to determine whether the variant might have more or less virulence than earlier versions.

Official measures against the virus have not always fared well among the Dutch. Anger over the country’s partial lockdown and other restrictions set off unruly and sometimes violent [protests](#) last month and in January in several cities.

Other European countries have also taken action as they detect Omicron in an increasing number of case samples. Some have tightened travel restrictions, while others have closed public venues and canceled holiday celebrations.

Austria announced tougher entry restrictions for travelers without booster shots. Germany’s regional health ministers are pushing for stricter rules for arrivals from Britain. And in Denmark, one of the first countries in Europe to see a surge of the variant, theaters, concert halls and amusement parks have been closed.

With the Omicron variant [“spreading at lightning speed” in Europe](#), it will probably become dominant in France by the start of next year, the French prime minister, Jean Castex, has warned.

Ireland imposed an 8 p.m. curfew on pubs and bars starting Monday, among other new restrictions. Prime Minister Micheál Martin addressed the nation on Friday night. “None of this is easy,” the Reuters news agency quoted him as saying. “We are all exhausted with Covid and the restrictions it requires. The twists and turns, the disappointments and the frustrations take a heavy toll on everyone. But it is the reality that we are dealing with.”

All countries are looking toward Britain, which has so far been hardest hit in the region, with a total of [nearly 25,000 confirmed Omicron cases](#) as of Saturday. Britain reported 90,418 new coronavirus cases on Saturday — down from a record of just over 93,000 on Friday.

Compared with the previous week, cases in Britain were up 44.4 percent. Deaths, which typically lag changes in case numbers, were down by nearly 6 percent over the same period.

The Omicron variant of the coronavirus [has been detected in 89 countries](#), with its case numbers doubling every 1.5 to three days in places with community transmission (not just infections acquired abroad), the [World Health Organization](#) has said.

HEADLINE	12/18 National address Tuesday on 'new steps'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/18/world/covid-omicron-vaccines-delta#biden-national-address-on-omicron
GIST	<p>President Biden will address the nation on Tuesday to respond to the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, which has sent infections soaring in parts of the country and raised new fears of the health of the country and its economy in the months to come.</p> <p>Mr. Biden “will announce new steps the Administration is taking to help communities in need of assistance,” Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary, wrote on Twitter on Saturday, “while also issuing a stark warning of what the winter will look like for Americans that choose to remain unvaccinated.”</p> <p>“We are prepared for the rising case levels,” she wrote in a follow-up Twitter post, and Mr. Biden “will detail how we will respond to this challenge. He will remind Americans that they can protect themselves from severe illness from COVID-19 by getting vaccinated and getting their booster shot when they are eligible.”</p> <p>The remarks will come as administration officials have faced new questions about how they will respond to the challenges of a pandemic that has persisted well beyond the administration’s expectations. Vice President Kamala Harris drew criticism this weekend for telling The Los Angeles Times in an interview that the administration was blindsided by the new variant and the one that preceded it, Delta, which drove spikes in infections and deaths from the virus this fall.</p> <p>“We didn’t see Delta coming,” Ms. Harris told the newspaper. “I think most scientists did not — upon whose advice and direction we have relied — didn’t see Delta coming. We didn’t see Omicron coming. And that’s the nature of what this, this awful virus has been, which as it turns out, has mutations and variants.”</p> <p>Mr. Biden has both sounded an alarm over Omicron this month while also counseling hope in the face of it, expressing optimism that the fast-spreading variant would not set back the progress the country has made to regain a sense of normalcy in recent months.</p> <p>After initially imposing a set of travel restrictions on certain countries, including South Africa, where the variant was first detected, Mr. Biden’s response to the variant has leaned heavily on imploring Americans to get vaccinated, including booster shots.</p> <p>For the unvaccinated, the president said on Thursday, “we are looking at a winter of severe illness and death — if you’re unvaccinated — for themselves, their families, and the hospitals they’ll soon overwhelm. But there’s good news: If you’re vaccinated and you had your booster shot, you’re protected from severe illness and death — period.”</p> <p>Ms. Psaki has fielded repeated questions in recent weeks over whether administration officials had revised their economic forecasts to account for Omicron. On Friday, she told reporters aboard Air Force One en route to South Carolina that federal surge teams were helping communities handle a surge in cases in hard-hit states like Colorado, Michigan and Vermont.</p> <p>“There’s not a new assessment that they have provided or new recommendations that they have provided to date” on the economic effects of those caseload increases, she said. “But that’s obviously a conversation that’s happening internally, as we look at not just the new variant, but any cases of — any surges that we’re seeing in communities across the country. And, of course, we’ll continue to assess any new steps that need to be taken.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 New York surge: no sign slowing down
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/12/18/world/covid-omicron-vaccines-delta#new-yorks-surge-shows-no-sign-of-slowing-down

GIST	<p>New York State reported yet another increase in coronavirus cases on Saturday as a convergence between the fast-spreading Omicron variant and a winter surge of the Delta variant continues to drive a spike in infections.</p> <p>The 21,908 new cases reported on Saturday was a slight increase over the 21,027 cases reported the day before. Both were daily records for the state.</p> <p>Still, the number announced on Saturday, which reflected test results from Friday, may not be the highest of the pandemic because a number of virus cases went unreported early last year when testing was not widely available.</p> <p>Cases, however, have been rising for weeks in New York, prompting some to cancel holiday plans and rush to get tested.</p> <p>State officials said the test positivity rate was 7.53 percent, up from about 2.6 percent on Sept. 22. Officials said that 3,909 people were hospitalized on Friday, a net increase of 70 patients.</p> <p>Gov. Kathy Hochul said on Saturday that 40 new pop-up vaccination sites would open across the state, as part of an effort to get New Yorkers fully vaccinated and boosted, which epidemiologists consider critical to protecting people from severe disease and death.</p> <p>“This is not like the beginning of the pandemic,” Ms. Hochul said in a statement. “We are prepared for the winter surge because we have the tools at our disposal. Getting vaccinated, getting the booster and wearing a mask are critical to avoiding getting seriously ill from Covid-19, so don’t take a chance.”</p> <p>The largest increase in New York State has been in Tompkins County, which includes Ithaca. Cases have increased by more than 640 percent there over the last 14 days, according to a New York Times database. An average of 224 people per 100,000 were infected with the coronavirus in Tompkins County, compared with about 61 per 100,000 in New York City, according to the database.</p> <p>The county is home to a large student population. On Wednesday, Ithaca College said that it had experienced “a notable spike” in cases over the previous 24 hours and was strongly discouraging students from participating in “unstructured off-campus gatherings.”</p> <p>On Tuesday, Cornell University canceled a ceremony for December graduates, closed libraries and took other restrictive measures after the school’s coronavirus testing lab found evidence of the Omicron variant in a number of students’ test specimens.</p> <p>Earlier this week, in an effort to curb the virus’s spread as many people travel for the holidays and spend more time indoors, Ms. Hochul imposed a statewide mandate requiring that masks be worn in all indoor public spaces that do not require proof of full vaccination for entry</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Covid surging but 1/3rd adults booster shots
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/us/omicron-booster-shots-americans.html
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO — Nine months ago, the lines stretched out the doors at Dr. Rusty Oshita’s three urgent care clinics, teeming with patients frantic to get vaccinated against Covid-19.</p> <p>Walk-ins jammed the parking lots and mini-mall sidewalks, some crowding too close, some bluffing to make the cut, hoping to pass as over 65 or essential workers. Now with the Omicron variant driving a new surge, Dr. Oshita has awaited a new rush, for booster shots this time.</p> <p>So far, he has been waiting in vain.</p>

“It’s scary,” the physician said this week as patients drifted in and out of his storefront in a Whole Foods shopping center in suburban Sacramento. “We’re not seeing the rise we were hoping for.”

As the pandemic has surged toward its third year, shape-shifting into the contagious new Omicron variant and spiking dangerously in the [Northeast](#), around the [Great Lakes](#) and in [other parts of the country](#), health officials and epidemiologists are vehemently urging Americans to get vaccinated and boosted. But the going has been slow.

Of American adults who are fully vaccinated and eligible for a booster shot, only about 30 percent have received one, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And among all Americans, only about one in six has received a booster. On Friday, as New York City was racing to confront a precipitous surge in infections, city officials said only about 1.5 million New Yorkers out of more than 8 million had received booster shots.

Some states may be undercounting, but the lag is alarming because Omicron infections appear to evade regular one- or two-dose vaccinations. Vaccines still provide robust protection against death and severe illness, but when it comes to preventing the virus from getting a foothold in the first place, scientists increasingly believe that three shots are the new two shots.

Just over half of Americans 65 and older — the population most vulnerable to a severe outcome from the virus — have received a booster. And public health experts are concerned that socioeconomic disparities in vaccination rates will be exacerbated as booster shots roll out. Difficulty in taking time off work and disconnection from health care systems have contributed to a persistent [gap in vaccination rates](#) between the most and least socioeconomically vulnerable counties.

Among the states, booster rates are mostly correlated with vaccination rates, with the lowest rates in the south. West Virginia has among the lowest booster rates, with 26.6 percent of people 65 and over, while Minnesota is the highest with 71.2 percent of that age group, according to an analysis of the [C.D.C. data](#) by Jen Kates, senior vice president of Kaiser Health Foundation.

Widespread, lasting immunization is critical to controlling the virus, according to health officials. Every poorly protected lung is a safe harbor for Covid-19 to spread and mutate. And every surge further exhausts the nation’s already depleted health care system, consuming finite hospital staff, resources and attention that then cannot be used to treat people with other serious illnesses.

Normal life in this country, scientists say, depends on the willingness of Americans to act both in their individual and in the broader community interest. The vaccine rollout, a year old this week, has averted about a million Covid deaths and 10 million hospitalizations, according to a [recent report](#) by the Commonwealth Fund.

But it has been plagued by polarization, misinformation and lately by muddled communication from the federal government — first over who was eligible, and most recently over whether a booster shot would make a difference.

“The vaccines have been fairly politicized, and there’s a lot of confusion — about the data that comes out, about ‘will the booster even protect me?’” Dr. Oshita said.

“I know there are individual considerations and I don’t want to pass judgment. But personally, as someone who has shoveled dirt on a 35-year-old patient’s grave site and attended a service for a 56-year-old gentleman just recently, this is something I think we all really need to look hard into.”

As recently as last month, many public health experts [opposed the Biden administration’s plan](#) to offer booster shots to all American adults. Many researchers said there was little scientific evidence to support the extra doses. Instead, they argued, the shots should be used to protect the billions of people who remain unvaccinated.

The C.D.C. initially limited their recommendation for boosters to Americans over age 50 and those ages 18 and older living in long-term care facilities. But in late November, many of the experts who opposed boosters for all [reversed course](#).

Prompted by growing concerns about the Omicron variant, the C.D.C. now says that all American adults should get boosters. Recent studies have shown that the third dose of coronavirus vaccine may protect against the worst outcomes of the fast-spreading Omicron variant, while two shots produce a weaker antibody response. And data from November released on Friday by the C.D.C. show that fully vaccinated individuals without a booster were [at least two times as likely](#) to test positive as those who received a booster shot.

But many Americans have not gotten the message.

“When Omicron came out, the national media made such a big deal about it that there was a pretty good increase in the amount of people that went for the boosters,” said DeWayne Bush, the emergency operations coordinator for Taylor County, Texas. But demand in his area, around Abilene, has since tapered off amid reports that the variant may cause less severe disease than other forms of the virus.

“Now,” he said, “people have some questions about why was it such a big, huge issue.”

In Phoenix, Julian Montes, 19, a security guard at an Amazon facility who just got his second dose of Moderna, wondered how many boosters it would take to keep him and his family healthy.

“If the variants keep coming, is there going to be even more vaccinations we’re going to have to get?” he asked, heading into a strip mall in the working-class Hispanic neighborhood of Maryvale, which has been devastated by Covid-19 and has also had one of the [lowest vaccination rates](#) around Phoenix. “When the people you rely on for information don’t fully know what to do, it gives you a sense of doubt.”

In San Francisco, Brenda Washington, 64, expressed similar confusion.

“So do we have to get it or not?” asked Ms. Washington, who works two jobs and volunteers as a community organizer, and had been unable to make time for a booster until this week.

“I thought there was no rush.”

Misinformation and political polarization are affecting the perception of boosters, as in the broader vaccine rollout. Smaller shares of vaccinated Republicans report receiving a booster dose, compared with Democrats, including among older adults.

The booster’s importance is not failing entirely to reach the public: The share of fully vaccinated adults who report receiving a booster dose more than doubled in November, according to a [Kaiser report](#). At least one-third of Black and Hispanic adults over the age of 50 have received a booster, and many more said they plan to get one soon, suggesting that the initial hesitancy that some had about getting vaccinated has waned.

And some people complain that they would gladly be boosted, but the shot is harder to obtain than vaccinations were earlier this year, when cities and states deployed fleets of mobile units and commandeered places like Dodger Stadium as mass vaccine centers.

“In my mom’s city of 200,000 people, there are only four locations offering it,” [tweeted](#) Patrick Carlson, a computer programmer in Seattle whose mother lives in Oxnard, Calif. Of those, he added, three did not administer shots on weekends, a fourth had no weekend appointments before the New Year, and one had no appointments before Dec. 31 at all.

With more than half of the states already reporting Omicron cases, the sense of urgency is mounting.

“Don’t wait,” Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York exhorted this week amid reports that the city’s seven-day average for new Covid infections had tripled in the last month, with hospitalizations rising.

“Get your booster shot right now, I mean right now, ahead of the holiday gatherings, while Omicron has just begun to assert itself.”

But not even the prospect of a third year of suffering seems to be sufficiently moving the needle.

Passing a pop-up vaccine clinic in Phoenix on a community college campus, Zee Wyatt, 22, and his sister Genesis, 18, said the recent push to get Americans boosted had only hardened their opposition to getting vaccinated. They were both unvaccinated and said they wore masks rigorously to try to stay healthy.

“If you came out with three shots and can still get it, it’s like, what’s the point?” Mr. Wyatt said. “Are we going to reach the fourth, fifth, sixth? You wasted your time.”

At the urgent care clinic in Sacramento this week, anxiety compounded the confusion.

Although California has one of the highest inoculation rates in the nation and [was the first state](#) to report a case caused by the ultra-contagious Omicron variant, a fifth of its eligible population is still unvaccinated, [according to state public health statistics](#). And despite an initial bump after Omicron’s alarming arrival in the United States was reported, some 60 percent of vaccinated Californians have yet to be boosted.

Jim and Geraldine Lemmond, in their 80s, had been vaccinated and boosted, but had come to the clinic for coronavirus tests because they still were not sure their protection was sufficient.

Davina Brown, 38, said she was getting the vaccine only because her job required it. “I don’t like the fact that I’m being forced into something,” she said. “My choices are not my choices — there’s no personal freedom.”

Raymond Bradley, 38, had come for the booster because he had gone out to a Sacramento Kings basketball game and had come away worried about breakthrough infections. “I want to get out,” he said. “See people. Not feel as anxious. And other people aren’t getting vaccinated, so I need to protect myself.”

He is weary, he added, of worst-case scenarios and conspiracy theories. He had no adverse reaction to the vaccine and “there have to be some scientists out there doing things for the good of the people.”

“Everything has just become strange,” he said. “Everything has become politicized versus common sense.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 DOH: 800,329 cases, 9674 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article256697322.html
GIST	The Washington state Department of Health reported 2,090 new COVID-19 cases and 21 deaths Friday. Statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus are 800,329 and 9,674 deaths. Those numbers are up from 798,239 cases and 9,653 as of Thursday. The case total includes 97,346 infections listed as probable. DOH revises previous case and death counts daily.
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HEADLINE	12/17 Seattle school bus costs skyrocketing
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/in-seattle-schools-the-cost-of-buses-climb-as-transportation-staggers-is-there-another-choice/
GIST	Even before the pandemic, transporting kids to school in Seattle was an expensive affair.

As the number of kids taking a yellow bus to school fell by 11% between 2016-17 and 2018-19, the district's spending per child on transportation increased by more than a third, to \$3,306. The figure is higher than any other school district in the state, and [more than three times the national average](#), according to a Seattle Times review of state and national data.

The increase is due to a complicated mix of forces, chief among them a yearslong national struggle to recruit and retain bus drivers. The district has spent millions of dollars on cab and van services to make up for chronically late buses, and agreed to increase payments to bus contractor First Student to help recruit and retain drivers.

Now, as the district [asks for bids](#) for its next transportation contract in 2022, some families are questioning why Seattle has continued to hire private contractors.

“What [is] the cost to families to keep using this failed model?” asked Jonathan Rosenblum, a Seattle parent who, along with his daughter, has campaigned for the district to move its bus service in-house.

Most districts across the country have seen their transportation expenses increase in recent years. State documents and information collected from a [third-party auditor](#) point to other factors that make Seattle transportation more costly, some of which the district has known about for years.

Though its riders live in the state's densest city, the district had among the lowest ridership levels per school bus in the 2018-19 school year among larger districts: 11,437 kids distributed in groups of roughly 39 kids per bus, according to state documents. The suburban Evergreen Public Schools, just north of Portland, puts an average of twice as many kids on each bus, and it transports just 500 fewer students than Seattle, according to state data.

This disparity defies the conventional wisdom in school transportation, which finds that, generally, districts in urban centers are able to cut down their per-pupil costs because they have more students and homes are closer together.

Tim Robinson, a district spokesperson, attributed the low ridership to tightly drawn boundaries for bus service at many schools, and use of smaller buses to navigate narrow streets. The number could also be low because large numbers of middle and high schoolers in Seattle use public transportation to commute to school, said Patti Enbody, the state's director of student transportation.

When asked about Seattle's ridership costs last month, Enbody paused for a moment. She suspected there may have been a math error in the state's reports because \$3,306 per pupil seemed high.

“I can't say what they're facing, but it's enough for me to want me to go back again, to make sure the right information is pulled,” she said.

There weren't any errors. But the per-pupil costs, she said, don't include the several hundred students who may have received van or cab service over the years, so it may not reflect the true cost.

“They're an outlier”

The latest [\\$40 million contract](#), which included a 5% rate increase between First Student and Seattle Public Schools, was approved last August to serve as many as 18,000 kids eligible for transportation. But because of trouble with recruiting drivers, the district suspended 142 routes soon after school began in the fall, meaning First Student isn't receiving the full contract amount, and that it is also serving a smaller number of children.

Around 60% of school bus riders in Seattle are receiving special education services, according to Robinson, the SPS spokesperson.

A third or more of these kids attend a school outside their neighborhood to receive services, according to the district. District policy requires these rides to take no longer than 60 minutes, and “the majority of these routes have less than 10 riders.”

A [2019 review](#) of transportation issues by the Council of Great City Schools, which was commissioned by the district, found that virtually 100% of kids with disabilities ride in compact vehicles (which seat 20 students, versus 74 on typical buses) that only transport other kids with disabilities. State law encourages, but doesn’t require, districts to integrate kids with disabilities on the standard large buses when possible — research shows that kids tend to fare better when they’re included in the general education setting.

This figure could be incomplete: the district only tracks ridership for kids with disabilities if transportation is an explicit part of their legally guaranteed services, or Individualized Education Plan. It’s possible that some kids receiving those services could be riding on the larger-capacity buses, but how many is unclear.

For many students, the smaller buses are necessary because they have wheelchair lifts and specially trained drivers. But some kids who get this service as part of their IEPs don’t necessarily need to be on the smaller bus, said Shawna Murphy, a Seattle parent of two kids with IEPs who ride the bus.

“I keep asking for inclusive bus service where ... students can ride a gen[eral] ed[ucation] bus with an [instructional aide] instead of being segregated,” Murphy said. “I think it would be worth differentiating. One size doesn’t fit all.”

The number of buses and drivers needed — and the number of delays, by proxy — [increased significantly](#) after the district changed bell schedules in 2017 and removed a later bell time that parents said clashed with their schedules. Having three staggered start and end times gave some bus drivers enough time to run two routes in the morning and afternoon.

The [newest request](#) for transportation bids by the district indicates that there may be a change to bell times in order to cut down on buses needed.

A couple of school districts, including Tacoma, run their own fleet of special education buses but contract out for general education buses, apparently in an effort to curb costs.

Seattle has to report its costs and total ridership to the state for reimbursement. But its per-pupil spending figures aren’t used to determine funding. The dollars are typically awarded based on the number of riders, miles driven and the previous year’s expenditures.

In fact, Seattle is one of a few districts in the state that doesn’t receive an “efficiency review” — a rating that compares a district’s expenses with others of the same size. It’s a way for districts to check back and see if anything “unusual” has happened with their costs, said Enbody. The ratings also do not count toward funding.

“SPS is considered 100% efficient, they’re an outlier, there are no other districts to compare them to,” she said.

Another way to do business?

After years of some of the rockiest school-bus service that Seattle kids have ever experienced, the district is now [looking at bids](#) on a new contract for school-bus service. It has pushed the deadline for the application back three times, eventually closing it on Dec. 8.

What’s in the next agreement, and who the successful bidder will be, will be critical to future spending and the lives of thousands of families relying on the service, 40% of whom saw their service cut at one point this fall.

Contracts with outside companies for school-bus service can be more expensive than providing the service in-house, said Mark Price, a labor economist who co-authored [a 2011 report](#) on the subject by examining

school districts in Pennsylvania. At the time, he was working for the Keystone Research Center, a pro-labor think tank.

In that state, school districts are given incentives to contract with outside providers in exchange for a higher transportation reimbursement. Switching to an outside provider didn't help or hurt the district, said Price, since their costs were covered by the state, but it did cost the state more money. There is no such incentive in Washington state.

Newspaper accounts suggest that SPS never owned its own fleet of buses. The district first started offering yellow bus service, through a contractor, in the 1970s. Absent that, children walked to school or used public transit.

The idea to contract can seem attractive at first, Price said. Contractors will pitch to districts that they can take these services off the district's hands, and cut costs — mostly by offering less in the way of benefits to workers. But at least in his study, that promise of lower costs didn't pan out during the years studied.

"In the U.S., we use contracting a lot for construction. A school district doesn't build a building once a year, so they use a contractor. That makes a lot of economic sense. But school transport is a bit different. It's a core function."

Price also believes private contracting may exacerbate the shortage of bus drivers, given the generally less generous benefits for private workers compared to those employed by school districts. In 2018, First Student's Seattle drivers went on strike for a week for better pay and benefits.

"[The companies] are not big-hearted. They are not in this because they love driving kids. They're in this because they want to make a return on their investment," said Price.

It's unclear if that disparity in costs exists in Washington state. Unlike in Pennsylvania, school-bus drivers are typically unionized here, and there hasn't been any local analysis on whether school districts' benefits are better.

The costs of purchasing a fleet of buses, and finding a place to park them, has kept that idea off the table for serious discussion so far. It is a possibility the district may consider in the future, said Robinson.

"I'm not sure how they would fund the purchases of new buses — that would be a challenge," said Enbody.

But the economic costs to working families who have been stranded over the years is the most important question, said Rosenblum, who works as a community organizer for Seattle City Councilmember Kshama Sawant. He called the continued privatization of the district's bus service "shameful."

Others have also spoken up about the district's practice of contracting.

"SPS is incredibly hampered by having a third party," especially when it comes to timely communication about buses, said Mary Ellen Russell, a parent who has been on the city's school traffic safety committee for years.

Three years ago, Rosenblum's 16-year-old daughter, Natalya McConnell, authored a petition with 1,000 signatures urging SPS to "Fire First Student" and bring services in-house.

McConnell, now a student at Franklin High School, had personal experience with the frenetic bus service. After researching the issue, she realized "the entire issue was caused by a profit incentive." She and her dad shared the petition with the School Board in February 2019.

But by October 2019, the district had extended its contract with the company and settled with First Student for [a fraction](#) of the additional expenses the district could have sought for inconsistent service.

HEADLINE	12/18 Study: Covid as catalyst for radicalization
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/far-right-using-covid-19-theories-to-grow-reach-study-shows/
GIST	<p>PARIS (AP) — The mugshot-style photos are posted on online message boards in black and white and look a little like old-fashioned “wanted” posters.</p> <p>“The Jews own COVID just like all of Hollywood,” the accompanying text says. “Wake up people.”</p> <p>The post is one of many that white supremacists and far-right extremists are using to expand their reach and recruit followers on the social media platform Telegram, according to the findings of researchers who sifted through nearly half a million comments on pages — called channels on Telegram — that they categorized as far-right from January 2020 to June 2021.</p> <p>The tactic has been successful: Nine of the 10 most viewed posts in the sample examined by the researchers contained misleading claims about the safety of vaccines or the pharmaceutical companies manufacturing them. One Telegram channel saw its total subscribers jump tenfold after it leaned into COVID-19 conspiracy theories.</p> <p>“COVID-19 has served as a catalyst for radicalization,” said the study’s author, Ciaran O’Connor, an analyst at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue. “It allows conspiracy theorists or extremists to create simple narratives, framing it as us versus them, good versus evil.”</p> <p>Other posts downplayed the severity of the coronavirus or pushed conspiracy theories about its origins. Many of the posts contain hate speech directed at Jews, Asians, women or other groups or violent rhetoric that would be automatically removed from Facebook or Twitter for violating the standards of those sites.</p> <p>Telegram, based in the United Arab Emirates, has many different kinds of users around the world, but it has become a favorite tool of some on the far-right in part because the platform lacks the content moderation of Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.</p> <p>In a statement to The Associated Press, Telegram said it welcomed “the peaceful expression of ideas, including those we do not agree with.” The statement said moderators monitor activity and user reports “in order to remove public calls for violence.”</p> <p>O’Connor said he believes the people behind these posts are trying to exploit fear and anxiety over COVID-19 to attract new recruits, whose loyalty may outlast the pandemic.</p> <p>Indeed, mixed in with the COVID-19 conspiracy posts are some direct recruitment pitches. For example, someone posted a link to a news story about a Long Island, New York, synagogue on a channel popular with the far-right Proud Boys and added a message urging followers to join them. “Embrace who you were called to be,” read the post, which was accompanied by a swastika.</p> <p>The researchers found suggestions that far-right groups on Telegram are working together. ISD researchers linked two usernames involved in running one Telegram channel to two prominent members of the American far-right. One was a scheduled speaker at the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a white supremacist deliberately drove into a crowd of counterdemonstrators, killing one and injuring 35.</p> <p>That channel has grown steadily since the pandemic began and now has a reach of around 400,000 views each day, according to Telegram Analytics, a service that keeps statistical data on about 150,000 Telegram channels on the site TGStat. In May 2020 the channel had 5,000 subscribers; it now has 50,000.</p>

The data is especially concerning given a rash of incidents around the world that indicate some extremists are moving from online rhetoric to offline action.

Gavin Yamey, a physician and public health professor at Duke University, has written about the rise of threats against health care workers during the pandemic. He said the harassment is even worse for those who are women, people of color, in a religious minority or LGBTQ.

Yamey, who is Jewish, has received threats and anti-Semitic messages, including one on Twitter calling for his family to be “executed.” He fears racist conspiracy theories and scapegoating may persist even after the pandemic eases.

“I worry that in some ways the genie is out of the bottle,” Yamey said.

The pandemic and the unrest it has caused have been linked to a wave of harassment and attacks on Asian-Americans. In Italy, a far-right opponents of vaccine mandates rampaged through a union headquarters and a hospital. In August in Hawaii, some of those who harassed that state’s Jewish lieutenant governor at his home during a vaccine protest brandished fliers with his photo and the word “Jew.”

Elsewhere, people have died after taking sham cures, pharmacists have destroyed vaccine vials, and others have damaged 5G telecommunication towers since the pandemic began nearly two years ago.

Events such as the pandemic leave many people feeling anxious and looking for explanations, according to Cynthia Miller-Idriss, director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab at American University, which studies far-right extremism. Conspiracy theories can provide an artificial sense of control, she said.

“COVID-19 has created fertile ground for recruitment because so many people around the world feel unsettled,” Miller-Idriss said. “These racist conspiracy theories give people a sense of control, a sense of power over events that make people feel powerless.”

Policing extremism online has challenged tech companies that say they must balance protecting free speech with removing hate speech. They also must contend with increasingly sophisticated tactics by groups that have learned to evade platform rules.

Facebook this month announced that it had removed a network of accounts based in Italy and France that had spread conspiracy theories about vaccines and carried out coordinated harassment campaigns against journalists, doctors and public health officials.

The network, called V_V, used both real and fake accounts and was overseen by a group of users who coordinated their activities on Telegram in an effort to hide their tracks from Facebook, company investigators found.

“They sought to mass-harass individuals with pro-vaccination views into making their posts private or deleting them, essentially suppressing their voices,” said Mike Dvilyanski, head of cyber espionage investigations at Meta, Facebook’s parent company.

O’Connor, the ISD researcher, said sites like Telegram will continue to serve as a refuge for extremists as long as they lack the moderation policies of the larger platforms.

“The guardrails that you see on other platforms, they don’t exist on Telegram,” O’Connor said. “That makes it a very attractive place for extremists.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 Boeing completes real estate divestments
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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/boeing-sells-its-longacres-headquarters-for-100m-nearly-completing-its-local-real-estate-divestments/
GIST	<p>Boeing has finalized the sale of its Commercial Airplanes headquarters campus at Longacres, which was put on the market in April.</p> <p>The buyer is Unico Properties, a subsidiary of a Seattle-based private equity real estate investment firm. The company did not disclose the purchase price but a person with knowledge of the sale gave it as \$100 million.</p> <p>In a news release Unico said it bought the site for its location near commuter rail, the Southcenter mall and Seattle-Tacoma International Airport as a “transit-oriented investment.”</p> <p>The sale completes a series of large real estate divestments by Boeing this year, driven by its need to drastically slash costs during the pandemic-driven aviation downturn.</p> <p>The site included not only the headquarters building but another building that once housed Boeing’s state-of-the-art training facilities and full-flight simulators. Pilots and airline mechanics used to come there from around the globe before Boeing moved the simulators to Miami and dispersed the training to other facilities.</p> <p>Boeing bought the site 31 years ago, displacing the former Longacres horse-racing track.</p> <p>The lavish flight training center opened first and cost \$65 million to build, according to former Boeing Vice President Peter Morton, who finalized the details.</p> <p>Morton installed a \$17,000 piano and commissioned music by Seattle-based pianist and composer Walt Wagner to be played at the opening ceremony in 1995.</p> <p>Earlier this year Boeing had already sold off:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seven office park buildings in Bellevue’s Eastgate area for \$139 million. • A large warehouse adjacent to Paine Field airport in Everett for \$35 million. • 310 acres of unused land next to its Frederickson manufacturing facility for \$200 million. • And, just last week, two office buildings in Renton for \$12 million. <p>For the Bellevue offices, Boeing agreed to a lease to continue occupying that office park for two years.</p> <p>The only Boeing property left on the market is a tiny, quarter-acre parcel on Beacon Hill, the site of a former radio tower.</p> <p>Ned Carner, Unico chief investment officer, in a statement touted the 150-acre Longacre campus’s “enviable connectivity and a park-like setting,” which includes two large ponds, an apple orchard and a 1-mile walking trail.</p> <p>It encompasses 962,800 commercial square feet between two large office buildings as well as a day care facility and about 2,150 parking stalls. It’s located 3 miles from the Tukwila Transit Center with next-stop access to downtown Seattle.</p> <p>Unico plans capital investments to refresh and modernize the properties, the company said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Omicron surge to peak higher than delta?
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/health/omicron-surge-predicted-to-peak-higher-than-delta-wave-in-king-county-its-here-and-its-moving-fast/

GIST

The omicron variant of the coronavirus is now spreading rapidly in King County and cases could skyrocket to more than three times the number at the peak of the region's delta wave as soon as next week, local virologists and public health leaders said Friday.

While omicron's spread is more advanced in other countries, such as the U.K., the Seattle area remains ahead of the curve in the United States, likely because of the region's strong testing data.

In a news briefing Friday afternoon, King County health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin warned of the variant's high transmissibility, urged vaccinations and boosters and encouraged residents to reconsider holiday travel plans in the next few weeks.

"The omicron outbreak we've been talking about is no longer theoretical," Duchin said. "It's real, it's here and it's moving fast."

The world is poised to enter a new phase of the pandemic amid omicron's blitz, with questions remaining over the variant's severity.

Omicron was first identified in South Africa in October and was discovered in Washington state about two weeks ago. The number of infections is expected to double every two to three days, Trevor Bedford, a scientist with the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, said Friday.

Bedford pointed to data from the University of Washington's virology lab, which has been sequencing the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic, showing that about 40% of all positive coronavirus samples have a spike-gene mutation — a deletion in omicron's spike protein — that helps identify the variant. The results mean almost half of positive samples are likely omicron.

Last week, about 13% of samples had the mutation.

"We don't know exactly what case counts will be in January in King County and in the U.S., but I'm certain it will be the highest case counts we've seen throughout the pandemic," Bedford said.

Now that new data is available, scientists are able to identify which cases are coming from the delta variant versus the omicron variant, he added. On Twitter, Bedford [shared a chart](#) that shows King County is projected to see about 2,100 daily omicron cases within the week — about three-and-a-half times the peak of the county's delta wave, which had a seven-day average of about 630 cases in late August.

"We're just now going to be hitting the point where omicron starts to kind of push above delta cases," Bedford said. "It was kind of hidden and submerged by delta in the last couple weeks, but its rate of growth will quickly make it visible."

Alex Greninger, assistant director of the clinical virology laboratories at the University of Washington Medical Center, said as of Friday, his labs have found more than 100 omicron cases.

"The number of cases and positivity rates increased rapidly within the last week or two," he said. "It all squares with watching out for the coming days, and this is sort of the last chance we have to do something about that."

With the surge of new cases, concern increases for the region's health care systems, said Dr. Santiago Neme, medical director of UW Medical Center-Northwest.

While the number of COVID-19 patients has generally decreased recently — as of Friday, UW Medicine was caring for 22 COVID patients — Neme said hospitals across the state have been operating at "full or over full" capacity for several months.

“Although there’s some hypothesis that omicron may be associated with a milder disease, any increase in hospitalization rates or hospital utilization will be pretty challenging for us and highly concerning because our health care workforce is already overtasked with the number of patients we’re seeing,” Neme said.

Intensive care unit beds throughout Washington are, on average, about 87% full and general hospital capacity is at about 91%, according to data from the state Department of Health.

While experts are predicting omicron has a reduced severity, mainly due to population immunity, the high rate of transmissibility could soon be a problem for hospitals, Duchin added.

He concluded the Friday briefing by telling the public it’s never been a better time to get vaccinated and a booster shot. Duchin also recommended people rethink indoor holiday gatherings this year — or if people do gather, to try and get a rapid test the day of the event.

“Today’s news is not what any of us wants to hear after two long and exhausting years of COVID-19,” he said. “Despite all we’ve been through, omicron is throwing a new challenge at us at a most inconvenient time.”

Inside a Seattle virology lab

Within one of the largest genome sequencing labs in Washington state — UW’s clinical virology lab in Seattle’s Eastlake neighborhood — more than 100 scientists and researchers expertly prepare coronavirus samples, run tests and churn out results every day.

In pre-pandemic times, Greninger, the lab’s assistant director, said his team runs about 50,000 molecular tests a year across all viruses, including herpes, HIV and hepatitis, among others.

Since the start of the pandemic, the lab has run about 3.9 million tests.

“That’s 78 years of testing in 22 months,” said Greninger, who’s worked in the lab for a little over six years.

The swab samples generally start their journey on the second floor of the building, where lab staffers prepare them to be tested for the coronavirus. The lab relies on a lot of automated equipment to detect the virus, so once prepared, the samples go into a machine that extracts nucleic acids and sets up a polymerase chain reaction, or PCR, to detect the virus.

From there, scientists sequence the positive samples to identify the coronavirus’s strain.

“Sequencing gives you every single nucleotide in the genome so you have a much higher resolution to look at transmission dynamics, as well as to extremely accurately tell what the type of the virus is,” Greninger said.

Sequencing can also help researchers tell if any additional mutations have developed.

In nearly all the rooms, everything is labeled with both handwritten and typed instructions, and racks of light-blue lab coats line some walls.

“In efforts of not contaminating each other, you must hang your lab coat on a HANGER! Or it will be placed in the hamper,” reads one note taped to the wall. Another note reminds staffers of daily and weekly cleaning schedules for work benches, lab instruments and the floor.

In some rooms, scientists wear full gowns, masks, hair caps and shoe covers to prevent contamination.

Since the start of the pandemic, UW’s virology lab has significantly grown, doubling its staff from 70 to over 200 people, said Lisa Rider, the lab’s program coordinator.

	<p>The team has also run out of space for the thousands of samples it's running per day, and has plans to expand to an 80,000-square-foot facility in Renton in a couple of months, Greninger said. The current space is about 30,000 square feet.</p> <p>He expects his team's workload to soar with the rapid emergence of the omicron variant, though the past couple of years have already been draining.</p> <p>"Whenever there's anything new that comes through, there's a little bit of something that gives you a burst of energy, but you can't maintain it," he said. And though vaccinations and boosters are now widely available, "it's like we're back in March 2020," Greninger said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Omicron doubling every 2-3 days King Co.
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/omicron-cases-king-county-seattle-university-of-washington-virology-lab/281-6efcde77-d5fd-4129-9cde-5611105bf829
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. — Omicron COVID-19 cases are doubling every two to three days in King County, according to data from the University of Washington's (UW) Virology lab.</p> <p>Within a week, UW estimates King County could see over 2,000 new COVID-19 cases per day due to the new variant, which is over three times higher than the peak of the delta wave last August.</p> <p>"We don't know exactly what case counts will be into January in King County and in the U.S., but I'm certain it will be the highest case counts we've seen throughout the pandemic," said Dr. Trevor Bedford with Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center at a press briefing on Friday.</p> <p>It's unclear how severe the omicron variant will turn out to be, but scientists are hoping it will prove to be less so than others due to population immunity, Bedford said.</p> <p>"The omicron outbreak is no longer theoretical," said Dr. Jeffery Duchin, Health Officer for Public Health–Seattle & King County. "It's real, it's here and it's moving fast."</p> <p>New COVID-19 cases in King County have doubled in the past week, Duchin said. Omicron was first discovered in King County on Dec. 4. Just under two weeks later, 40% of all COVID-19 cases sequenced in UW's labs are likely to be omicron, and the variant appears to be overtaking delta as the most common within the region.</p> <p>"We now know we have rapid community spread of omicron locally, which is a significant problem because of how many people could be rapidly infected," Duchin said.</p> <p>Omicron is less resistant to antibody protection lingering from past COVID-19 infections, according to health officials. While vaccines may be less effective in preventing infection, they still prevent serious illness, hospitalization and death, Duchin said.</p> <p>There are still 160,000 people who haven't initiated their vaccine series and 250,000 people who haven't completed their vaccine series in King County, according to public health data.</p> <p>"Omicron is going to find many of these people," Duchin warned.</p> <p>Area hospitals are still full, with many over capacity, according to Dr. Santiago Neme with UW Medicine. Although hospital capacity issues are not solely due to COVID-19 patients, the new omicron surge could put an additional strain on hospitals in the midst of ongoing staffing challenges.</p> <p>"Any increase in hospitalization will be pretty challenging for us and highly concerning," Neme said. "The healthcare workforce is already overtasked with the number of patients."</p>

	<p>Dr. Duchin warned schools could see an increase in cases in students and staff following winter break. He also cautioned businesses and healthcare facilities to prepare for impacts to the workforce due to the upcoming surge.</p> <p>"I think this is a good time to do serious contingency planning, we don't know what to expect and we do not want to underestimate this virus," Duchin said. "I think we need to prepare for large waves of people becoming ill very quickly together."</p> <p>"I think people should plan for large-scale absenteeism," he continued. "It's best to be prepared."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 DOH detects omicron in Snohomish Co.
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/first-case-omicron-variant-detected-snohomish-county/3YNOW3EE3JCERGP3ZG2MHXZCK4/
GIST	<p>SNOHOMISH COUNTY, Wash. — The omicron variant of COVID-19 has now been detected in Snohomish County, according to the Washington Department of Health.</p> <p>The DOH has confirmed that at least one case of the variant has been detected after sequencing of lab results, but they did not share additional details about the case.</p> <p>“This shouldn’t come as a surprise given recent detection throughout the Puget Sound region,” said Snohomish Health District Health Officer Dr. Chris Spitters. “It serves as a reminder to complete vaccination, get a booster as soon as possible once eligible, continue masking in public, maximize ventilation of indoor spaces, and keep up with all other public health measures. Based upon observations elsewhere, omicron seems likely to displace delta over the coming month or two as the dominant strain.”</p> <p>In a statement, the Snohomish Health District shared that they do not currently plan on changing the COVID-19 prevention measures in place for the county, but hope this serves as a “cue” that people should continue to maintain precautions to reduce the spread of the virus.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Strike halts flow of concrete in King Co.
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/strike-halts-flow-concrete-king-county-light-rail-other-major-projects-impacted/SY7ZDQRXFBDLCKFWOK3RVP6HQ/
GIST	<p>KING COUNTY, Wash. — Sound Transit’s light rail expansion faces major delays after a union strike halted the flow of concrete across King County.</p> <p>It means much of the construction work for light rail and other major projects has come to halt.</p> <p>About 300 workers in Teamsters Local 174 have been protesting around the clock for two weeks or longer, asking for higher wages.</p> <p>“Long hours, don’t know when you get to go home to see your family, working in every environment. We worked through COVID,” said Tim Davis, who drives a concrete mixer truck. “It’s frustrating. We just want what everyone else has,” he said.</p> <p>The union is demanding higher wages as well as health benefits for retirees.</p> <p>“The wages they’re offering is dramatically below what the other trades have already rejected,” said Jamie Fleming, a spokesperson for Teamsters 174.</p> <p>Workers for all major concrete suppliers in King County have stopped deliveries and are picketing at these job sites: CalPortland, Cadman, Lehigh Cement, Salmon Bay Sand & Gravel, Stoneway Concrete, and Gary Merlino Construction.</p>

“The Teamsters are negotiating with six different companies, five of them are in sand and gravel, and one construction,” Fleming said “They have not spoken to us since the strike started.”

Sound Transit’s light rail expansion is especially hard hit.

“The impact is bad and it’s getting worse,” said Peter Rogoff, CEO of Sound Transit. “We’ve had over 500 deliveries of concrete not happen over the course of the last two weeks. If we can’t get concrete, we’re in a world of hurt.”

Rogoff said crews are doing workarounds where they can, but some construction has stopped. It means about 40 people in other trades already have been laid off at Sound Transit projects alone.

“That’s going to spiral up very quickly,” Rogoff said. “My concern is what’s coming next week and the week after that,” he said.

Rogoff said Sound Transit is in communication with both parties – the suppliers and the union – in hopes negotiations will begin.

“The most depressing thing is they’re not at the table and there’s no talks right now about getting back to the table,” Rogoff said.

Teamsters 174 is getting a lot of community support, including from King County Councilmember Girmay Zahilay who joined picketers on Thursday.

“They can’t even get their employers to come to the table and negotiate in good faith,” Zahilay said. “That’s a really unfortunate situation and I think we all need to support the workers and make sure they have the pay they need to survive.”

Fleming said Teamsters 174 plans to continue picketing at six sites around Seattle and King County 24/7 this holiday season. Workers said they are confident their voices will be heard.

“We are in this until we win and that’s it,” Fleming said.

The union said supporters can help by dropping off warm drinks, food, firewood for burn barrels, or by donating online.

KIRO7 reached out to Gary Merlino Construction, the company the union said is leading negotiations for employers – but did not receive a response in time for this story.

A spokesperson with CalPortland emailed a statement on behalf of the concrete companies:

“Glacier Northwest, Stoneway Concrete, Salmon Bay Sand & Gravel and Cadman, Inc. have bargained in a coordinated manner with Local 174 and have presented a generous and historic offer that includes wage increases in excess of 17.6% over the next three years, an improvement in pension contributions and continued support of an excellent Medical Benefits Package that includes a longstanding existing Retirees Health and Welfare plan the employees currently pay nothing into.

“The Union leadership has rejected all good faith attempts to mediate and settle this matter. The companies stand ready to resolve this dispute and get back to the business of supplying concrete to our customers.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 Tacoma homeless encampment cleared
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/tacoma-homeless-encampment-cleared-hotel-opened-as-temporary-shelter

GIST	<p>A Tacoma homeless encampment has been cleared and police say it went smoothly. But, instead of being out in the cold, many of the people there are experiencing their first night of warmth.</p> <p>The camp is at Portland Avenue and 25th Street. Crews worked all day Friday clearing this camp which at last count had about 20 tents. Police say the people here were given notice several weeks ago that this was going to happen.</p> <p>It was at the request of Sound Transit which operates the Sounder commuter train. Other trains pass here too and there was concern people in the camp were getting onto the tracks through a hole in the fence.</p> <p>Scott Thompson of Sound Transit said, “So for us, it’s just a matter of keeping everybody, not only people camping here safe but people in the area safe as well.”</p> <p>But, what about the timing? It is right at the coldest time of the year. “I think it’s horrible,” said Jennea Beaston who is experiencing homelessness. “I think the city needs to come in and help these people more. They just keep pushing them back and pushing them from one place to another.”</p> <p>But the city said it is doing something. It, along with Lakewood and Pierce County, opened Aspen Court Wednesday at the old Comfort Inn for up to 120 people. Tacoma Mayor Victoria Woodards on Monday said, “And the first thing they need is clean, warm, comfortable shelter.”</p> <p>Several of the camp residents are eager to take advantage of the 3-6 month stay.</p> <p>Joseph Rhodes who is experiencing homelessness is heading to the hotel and said, “Now putting us indoors to where we’re not freezing to where we have the opportunity to cook our own food now. Just basically do what they tell me to do and hopefully, it gets me to where I can have my own place.”</p> <p>Corey Flagg is also heading to the hotel and said, “Because it helps us clean up and be off the streets and give us all an equal chance to be indoors, you know what I’m saying. And be warm and cozy and give our best effort.”</p> <p>This added to the three tiny home micro-shelter villages, stability sites and emergency shelter beds.</p> <p>This is the second clearing of a homeless camp in Tacoma in six weeks. The site just off 6th Avenue is all clean today.</p> <p>The Tacoma City Council had been considering a camping ban, but that has been put on hold for now.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 DOH announces new guidelines for sports
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/doh-announces-new-guidelines-for-sports-following-covid-outbreak-at-wrestling-tournament
GIST	<p>Washington State—A massive -COVID-19 outbreak tied to wrestling tournaments in the state continues to grow.</p> <p>Cases are up to 200 across 13 counties in the state and Oregon.</p> <p>On Friday, the Washington State Department of Health announced new guidelines for high-contact indoor sports in the wake of the multi-school, multi-county outbreak.</p> <p>After wrestling tournaments spawned the massive Covid-19 outbreak, health officials are adding even more safety measures to student sports.</p> <p>Something parents like Lena Martin want to see, after her child’s high school hosted one of the tournaments.</p>

“I think it’s fairly simple, you’re not vaccinated, you’re not wearing a mask, you can’t do sports simple as that,” said Martin, a Sumner High School parent.

Cases from the outbreak are up to 200 and counting, and so far, three are the omicron variant.

Seattle Public Schools says ten wrestlers and two staff have tested positive.

“Life has to live on, and you just have to be more cautious, that’s it,” said parent Tony Championsmith.

The new safety measures require added testing requirements for all indoor high contact sports like basketball, wrestling, water polo and competitive cheer.

UW Medicine Director of Sports Cardiology, Dr. Jonathan Drezner, agrees with the requirements.

“A lot of this is preventable,” said Dr. Drezner. “There is a way to continue youth sports indoors and do it safely, but we all have to buy into the protocols.”

The guidelines are as follows:

Required testing of all athletes, coaches, trainers, and support personnel, regardless of vaccination status.

Increased testing frequency to three times per week. Among those screening tests, at least one must occur no sooner than the day before the competition; ideally, and whenever possible, the day of the event.

In addition, DOH wants to remind people of existing requirements for all K-12 sporting events that help keep athletes, staff, and families safer when attending these events:

All indoor event spectators must wear masks and should distance themselves from other families or households to the degree possible.

Mask wearing is required among all athletes, coaches, trainers, and support personnel in indoor public spaces except when actively competing.

Referees must wear masks except when actively officiated and running.

Health officials said with Omicron crossing over with Delta, the only way to get past it is by doing what we know already works.

“Even if you’re unvaccinated, I still think there is a way to play sports, having said that, it is absolutely safer for everyone to be vaccinated, safer for the athletes and safer for society,” said Dr. Drezner.

The State Health Department said there will be an update on the outbreak on Tuesday.

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HEADLINE	12/17 DOH recommends Pfizer, Moderna over J&J
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/wa-dept-of-health-recommends-pfizer-moderna-over-jj
GIST	<p>The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) is recommending people 18 and older get either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine instead of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson (J&J) vaccine.</p> <p>The announcement follows guidance and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Western States Scientific Safety Review Workgroup.</p> <p>The DOH says those who want the J&J vaccine should contact their health care provider as the vaccine will still be available across the state.</p>

	<p>The recommendation follows new data that shows thrombosis and thrombocytopenia syndrome, or TTS, a rare but serious condition involving blood clots, has been reported in some people who received the J&J vaccine. However, the risk is rare.</p> <p>Nationwide, 54 cases of TTS, including nine deaths, have been reported, which is a small fraction of the 14 million doses of J&J given overall.</p> <p>While TTS has been seen in both men and women, the most at-risk group is women 30 - 49. If you develop severe headaches, abdominal pain, leg pain, or shortness of breath within three weeks of receiving the J&J vaccine, DOH says you should contact your health care provider.</p> <p>Out of the more than 11.4 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine administered in Washington, about 436,000 doses have been the J&J vaccine or about 4%. DOH says there have been six possible cases of TTS following J&J vaccinations in Washington, including one death.</p> <p>“Public health and safety are, and will always be, our top priorities, which is why we are adopting this new guidance,” said Umair A. Shah, MD, MPH, Secretary of Health. “Today, more than 5 million Washingtonians are fully vaccinated, which means they are protecting themselves from serious illness, hospitalization, and death. I continue to encourage everyone to get vaccinated and, with this news, boosted with an mRNA vaccine as soon as possible.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 NHL postpones Kraken game; covid issues
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/sports/nhl-postpones-seattle-kraken-vs-calgary-flames-game
GIST	<p>The NHL has postponed the Seattle Kraken road game against the Calgary Flames on Dec. 23 amid worsening COVID-19 test results among three teams.</p> <p>According to the Kraken, a makeup date for the game has not yet been determined.</p> <p>In an effort to minimize COVID-19 outbreaks, the league is postponing all Calgary games from Dec. 17-26.</p> <p>All games have also been postponed for the Colorado Avalanche and Florida Panthers.</p> <p>The training facilities for all three teams have been closed with the league citing "concern with the number of positive cases within the last two days as well concern for continued COVID spread in the coming days."</p> <p>The latest adjustments brought the total of NHL games postponed this season to 20.</p> <p>"The fact that we only shut down two additional teams means we are trying to avoid a full league shutdown," Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly told The Associated Press by email. He added that is "obviously subject to change based on circumstances."</p> <p>More than 60 players are now in NHL COVID protocol, including 19 on the Flames. All but one player on active rosters across the league, Detroit's Tyler Bertuzzi, are considered fully vaccinated. It is unclear how many have received an additional COVID-19 vaccine booster.</p> <p>The NHL postponed only five games during the first two months of the season, and one has already been rescheduled and played. As recently as last week, NHL Players' Association executive director Don Fehr said the league has "been able to cope" with a few postponements so far.</p> <p>That has changed rapidly. In all, Calgary has had six games postponed, the Avalanche four and the Panthers three.</p>

The Seattle Seahawks vs. Los Angeles Rams game has been moved to Tuesday after a wave of Rams' players were added to the COVID-19 protocol list.

The NHL hours earlier announced Saturday's game in Montreal between the Canadians and Boston was being postponed. There was no word from the league on the Bruins' game Sunday at Ottawa, which like Toronto and other cities in Ontario is capping venue capacity at 50% based on provincial health mandates.

The Canadiens beat Philadelphia on Thursday night in a mostly empty Bell Centre because of the rise of COVID-19 cases in Quebec, as required by public health officials there.

The Bruins were without seven players because of COVID-19 protocol — including stars Brad Marchand and Patrice Bergeron — for Thursday night's 3-1 loss at the New York Islanders. They played a man down with 11 forwards and six defensemen. Colorado players voted to go ahead with their game Thursday at Nashville, which also had several players and coaches unavailable for virus-related reasons.

The Toronto Maple Leafs canceled their practice in Vancouver on Friday for precautionary reasons after captain John Tavares and forward Alexander Kerfoot were added to the protocol.

Postponing this many games could threaten NHL participation in the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing, which begin Feb. 4. When the league and players agreed to participate, they left open the door to withdrawing if they need the two-and-a-half-week break to complete the season.

Daly said Friday there had been no decision made yet on the Olympics but pointed out the possibility is "becoming more and more difficult." The league has until Jan. 10 to withdraw without financial penalty.

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HEADLINE	12/17 WA delays new long-term care payroll tax
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/washington-state-delays-new-long-term-care-payroll-tax-inslee-says
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. - Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said Friday that the state is delaying the start of a mandatory payroll tax to fund Washington state's new long-term care program.</p> <p>Inslee and Washington Democratic legislative leaders announced an agreement to push back the new WA Cares payroll levy as they address issues with the new long-term care program.</p> <p>During the pause, employers won't incur penalties and interest for not withholding those taxes from worker wages, he added.</p> <p>"I have been in ongoing discussions with legislators about the long-term care bill, which is set to begin collecting funds in January. This bill will help provide much-needed care and coverage for Washingtonians as they age. However, legislators have identified some areas that need adjustments and I agree. We need to give legislators the opportunity to make refinements to the bill," said Gov. Jay Inslee. "Therefore, I am taking measures within my authority and ordering the state Employment Security Department not to collect the premiums from this program from employers before they come due in April."</p> <p>Senators Andy Billig and Speaker Laurie Jenkins released a statement saying that the Washington Cares Fund premium assessment will be delayed through the 2023 legislative session:</p> <p>"The legislature has the opportunity to delay the Cares Fund premium assessment this year in order to make improvements to the Fund during the 2022 legislative session and we fully intend to do so. Pausing the program so that it can better serve disabled veterans, military spouses, non-residents, and near retirees will improve the program. A pause will also give the Long Term Care Commission the ability to study and make recommendations about residents who move out of Washington to retire and assure that those who have opted out of the program maintain their private insurance policies. These improvements will provide</p>

security and stability now and into the future for this critical safety net for our state's seniors and people with disabilities."

Under the law, which was passed in 2019, workers will pay a premium of .58% of total pay per paycheck, meaning an employee with a salary of \$50,000 will pay \$290 a year. Starting Jan. 1, 2025, people who need assistance with at least three "activities of daily living" such as bathing, dressing or administration of medication, can tap into the fund to pay for things like in-home care, home modifications like a wheelchair ramp and rides to the doctor.

The benefit also covers home-delivered meals, and reimbursement to unpaid family caregivers. The lifetime maximum of the benefit is \$36,500, with annual increases to be determined based on inflation. [Supporters of the program](#) decried any effort to delay the program.

"Delaying WA Cares would harm an estimated 38,000 disabled, elderly, or seriously ill people who are desperate for long-term care benefits in 2025," Jessica Gomez with the coalition Washingtonians for a Responsible Future, said in a written statement.

According to AARP of Washington, 70% of residents 65 and older will require some type of assistance to live independently.

Gomez also said the delay would create confusion for those who bought private long-term care insurance this year by a Nov. 1, deadline in order to opt out of the tax.

As of Dec. 2, the Employment Security Department had received more than 430,000 applications for an exemption, and more than 334,000 had been approved thus far.

The high [number of exemptions has raised concerns about the viability of the program](#), and the potential of a premium increase for workers.

"If the long-term solvency is in doubt, we must be able to examine all options for modifying the program to ensure viability into the future," the Democratic senators wrote.

To be eligible for the state benefits, workers will have had to have paid the premium working at least 500 hours per year for three of the previous six years in which they're seeking the benefit or for a total of 10 years, with at least five of those paid without interruption.

The benefit is not portable, so people who pay into the program but later move out of state will not be able to access it, and it only covers the taxpayer, not a spouse or dependent. The benefit also isn't available to those who work in Washington and will pay the deduction but live in neighboring states, like Oregon.

Last month, a [class action lawsuit was filed with the federal court for the Western District of Washington](#) on behalf of three businesses in the state and six individuals opposed to the payroll tax.

Democratic House Majority Leader Pat Sullivan said leaders in the House are already looking at changes to elements of the program, including portability and border state residents.

"A delay would give us more time to address some of those issues that have been raised," he said.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Seahawks Tuesday game: NFL covid issues
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/sports/seahawks-vs-rams-game-moved-to-tuesday-due-to-covid-19-issues-in-nfl
GIST	The Seattle Seahawks vs. Los Angeles Rams game has been moved to Tuesday after a wave of Rams' players were added to the COVID-19 protocol list. Kickoff between the Seahawks and Rams will now be at 4 p.m. PT Tuesday, Dec. 21 on FOX 13.

As of Thursday, the Rams had [more than 20 players](#) on the COVID protocol list.

The [Seahawks said two players](#) were on [the COVID-19 protocol list](#). Wide receiver Tyler Lockett and running back Alex Collins are the second and third players this season to be placed on the list.

Earlier this season, tight end [Gerald Everett missed two games](#).

Seattle will now only have four days in between games before hosting the Chicago Bears at Lumen Field on Sunday, Dec. 26. Kickoff is scheduled for 1:05 p.m. on FOX 13.

It's just one of [several NFL games that were rescheduled](#) this weekend as more players across the league were placed on the COVID list.

The matchup between the Philadelphia Eagles and Washington Football Team was also moved to Tuesday at 7 p.m. ET/ 4 p.m. PT.

The Las Vegas Raiders' game against the Cleveland Browns will now be played on Monday at 5 p.m. ET/2 p.m. PT on NFL Network. The Browns could have been without as many as 16 regulars on Saturday.

The NFL made similar schedule adjustments last year, but did not have to reschedule games during the first 14 weeks of this season. But this weekend's games became jeopardized with more than 100 players testing positive for COVID-19 in recent days.

Previously, the NFL did not plan to move any games because of coronavirus outbreaks. It even said forfeits "could be in play."

But this weekend's games became jeopardized with more than 100 players testing positive for COVID-19 in recent days.

"We have made these schedule changes based on medical advice and after discussion with the NFLPA as we are seeing a new, highly transmissible form of the virus this week resulting in a substantial increase in cases across the league," The NFL said in a news release. "We continue to make decisions in consultation with medical experts to ensure the health and safety of the NFL community."

Other sports have seen an uptick in viral cases. Many NBA and NHL teams have seen their rosters ravaged by the virus in recent weeks.

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HEADLINE	12/17 King Co. officials: prepare; omicron surge
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/health-officials-king-county-should-prepare-for-omicron-covid-surge
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Public Health – Seattle & King County officials urged people on Friday to prepare for a surge of omicron COVID-19 cases as the highly-infectious variant spreads through the region.</p> <p>"The UW Medicine Virology Lab is testing 100 to 200 samples a day and has seen the variant quickly grow in a matter of days," said Dr. Alex Greninger, assistant director, University of Washington Medicine Clinical Virology Laboratory.</p> <p>Currently, more than one-third of the COVID samples they sequence are the omicron variant, he said, and officials expect omicron cases to potentially reach upward of 2,100 cases a day in King County alone by Dec. 22.</p> <p>That means now is an important time for people to do what they can to limit the number of people becoming ill which could result in overloading Washington's already stressed healthcare system, Seattle and King County health officer Dr. Jeff Duchin said.</p>

While the [severity of omicron cases](#) isn't clear yet, Duchin said it is clear that this variant is going to find people — especially people who remain unvaccinated or who have relied on previous COVID-19 infection for immunity.

"We can also expect that vaccines will continue to work against severe infection," he added. "The single most important thing we can do is to get vaccinated and boosted — and even if you've already had COVID," he said.

He said vaccines, along with other measures such as high-quality masking, limiting indoor gatherings and postponing travel when possible, will [help slow the spread of this variant](#).

He also said businesses and health care facilities should plan for impacts on the workforce and reduce risks and that schools may see impacts from more cases after winter break.

Earlier this week state health officials announced a COVID-19 outbreak of some 85 people [linked to recent high school wrestling tournaments](#). On Friday, state officials said an estimated 200 cases had been tied to the events and they updated health and safety requirements for high-contact indoor sports.

Those involved in such sports, from coaches to trainers to athletes, must now take COVID-19 tests three times per week, regardless of vaccination status. They also reiterated that spectators at indoor events must wear masks and should distance from those not in their household. Everyone involved in a sport needs to continue to wear a mask when not actively competing, officials said.

"Omicron is a game-changer, but we know layered prevention measures slow the spread of COVID-19 in sports, schools, and communities," said Lacy Fehrenbach, Deputy Secretary for the COVID-19 response. "Please get vaccinated, boosted, wear a well-fitting mask, and maintain your distance to help our kids stay healthy, stay in the game, and stay in school."

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	12/19 Govt. massive, secret stockpile bitcoin
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/19/what-the-us-government-does-with-its-secret-bitcoin-stockpile.html
GIST	<p>For years, the U.S. government has maintained a side hustle auctioning off bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. Historically, Uncle Sam has done a pretty lousy job of timing the market.</p> <p>The 500 bitcoin it sold to Riot Blockchain in 2018 for around \$5 million? That's now worth north of \$23 million. Or the 30,000 bitcoin that went to billionaire venture capitalist Tim Draper for \$19 million in 2014? That would be more than \$1.3 billion today.</p> <p>The government has obtained all that bitcoin by seizing it, alongside the usual assets one would expect from high-profile criminal sting operations. It all gets sold off in a similar fashion.</p> <p>"It could be 10 boats, 12 cars, and then one of the lots is X number of bitcoin being auctioned," said Jarod Koopman, director of the Internal Revenue Service's cybercrime unit.</p> <p>One of the next seizures up on the auction block is \$56 million worth of cryptocurrencies that authorities confiscated as part of a Ponzi scheme case involving offshore crypto lending program BitConnect. Unlike other auctions where the proceeds are redistributed to different government agencies, the cash from this crypto sale will be used to reimburse victims of the fraud.</p> <p>The government's crypto seizure and sale operation is growing so fast that it just enlisted the help of the private sector to manage the storage and sales of its hoard of tokens.</p>

Seizing and stockpiling bitcoin

For the most part, the U.S. has used legacy crime-fighting tools to deal with tracking and seizing cryptographically built tokens, which were inherently designed to evade law enforcement.

“The government is usually more than a few steps behind the criminals when it comes to innovation and technology,” said Jud Welle, a former federal cybercrime prosecutor.

“This is not the kind of thing that would show up in your basic training,” Welle said. But he predicts that in three to five years, “there will be manuals edited and updated with, this is how you approach crypto tracing, this is how you approach crypto seizure.”

There are currently three main junctures in the flow of bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies through the criminal justice system in the U.S.

The first phase is search and seizure. The second is the liquidation of raided crypto. And the third is deployment of the proceeds from those crypto sales.

In practice, the first stage is a group effort, according to Koopman. He said his team often works on joint investigations alongside other government agencies. That could be the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Homeland Security, the Secret Service, the Drug Enforcement Agency, or the [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives](#).

“A lot of cases, especially in the cyber arena, become...joint investigations, because no one agency can do it all,” said Koopman, who worked on the government’s Silk Road cases and the 2017 AlphaBay investigation, which culminated in the closure of another popular and massive dark web marketplace.

Koopman said his division at the IRS typically handles crypto tracing and open source intelligence, which includes investigating tax evasion, false tax returns, and money laundering. His team consists of sworn law enforcement officers, who carry weapons and badges and who execute search, arrest and seizure warrants.

Other agencies that have more money and resources focus on the technical components.

“Then we all come together when it’s time to execute any type of enforcement action, whether that’s an arrest, a seizure or a search warrant. And that could be nationally or globally,” he said.

During the seizure itself, multiple agents are involved to ensure proper oversight. That includes managers, who establish the necessary hardware wallets to secure the seized crypto.

“We maintain private keys only in headquarters so that it can’t be tampered with,” Koopman said.

In recent years, the government has brought back record amounts of crypto.

“In fiscal year 2019, we had about \$700,000 worth of crypto seizures. In 2020, it was up to \$137 million. And so far in 2021, we’re at \$1.2 billion,” Koopman told CNBC in August. The fiscal year ended Sept. 30. [As cybercrime picks up](#) — and the haul of digital tokens along with it — government crypto coffers are expected to swell even further.

The crypto auction block

Once a case is closed, the U.S. Marshals Service is the main agency responsible for auctioning off the government’s crypto holdings. To date, it has [seized and auctioned more than 185,000 bitcoins](#). That cache of coins is currently worth around \$8.6 billion, though many were sold in batches well below today’s price.

It’s a big responsibility for one government entity to assume, which is part of why the Marshals Service no longer shoulders the task alone.

The U.S. General Services Administration, an agency that typically auctions surplus federal assets, such as tractors, added confiscated cryptocurrencies to the auction block earlier this year.

In July, following a more than yearlong search, the Department of Justice [hired San Francisco-based Anchorage Digital](#) to be its custodian for the cryptocurrency seized or forfeited in criminal cases.

Anchorage, the [first federally chartered bank for crypto](#), will help the government store and liquidate this digital property. The contract was previously awarded to BitGo.

“The fact that the Marshals Service is getting professionals to help them is a good sign that this is here to stay,” said Sharon Cohen Levin, who worked on the first Silk Road prosecution and spent 20 years as chief of the money laundering and asset forfeiture unit in the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York.

The process of auctioning off crypto, in blocks, at fair market value, likely won’t change, according to Koopman.

“You basically get in line to auction it off. We don’t ever want to flood the market with a tremendous amount, which then could have an effect on the pricing component,” he said.

But other than spacing out sales, Koopman said, trying to “time” the market to sell at peak crypto prices isn’t his objective. “We don’t try to play the market,” he said.

In November 2020, the [government seized \\$1 billion](#) worth of bitcoin linked to Silk Road. Because the case is still pending, those bitcoins are sitting idle in a crypto wallet. Had the government sold its bitcoin stake when the price of the token peaked above \$67,000 last month, coffers would have been a whole lot bigger than if they liquidated at today’s price.

Where the money goes

Once a case is closed and the crypto has been exchanged for fiat currency, the feds then divvy the spoils. The proceeds of the sale are typically deposited into one of two accounts: The Treasury Forfeiture Fund or the Department of Justice Assets Forfeiture Fund.

“The underlying investigative agency determines which fund the money goes to,” Levin said.

Koopman said the crypto traced and seized by his team accounts for roughly 60% to 70% of the Treasury Forfeiture Fund, making it the largest individual contributor.

After it’s placed into one of these two funds, the liquidated crypto can then be put toward a variety of line items. Congress, for example, can rescind the money and give the cash to other projects.

“Agencies can put in requests to gain access to some of that money for funding of operations,” said Koopman. “We’re able to put in a request and say, ‘We’re looking for additional licenses or additional gear,’ and then that’s reviewed by the Executive Office of Treasury.”

Some years, Koopman’s team receives varying amounts based on the initiatives proposed. Other years, they get nothing because Congress will choose to rescind all the money out of the account.

Tracking where all the money goes isn’t a straightforward process, according to Alex Lakatos, a partner with Washington, D.C. law firm Mayer Brown who advises clients on forfeiture.

The Justice Department hosts [Forfeiture.gov](#), which offers some optics on current seizure operations. [This document](#), for example, outlines a case from May where 1.04430259 bitcoin was taken from a hardware wallet belonging to an individual in Kansas. Another 10 were [taken from a Texas resident](#) in April. But it’s unclear whether the list is a comprehensive compilation of all active cases.

	<p>“I don’t believe there’s any one place that has all the crypto that the U.S. Marshals are holding, let alone the different states that may have forfeited crypto. It’s very much a hodgepodge,” said Lakatos. “I don’t even know if someone in the government wanted to get their arms around it, how they would go about doing it.”</p> <p>A Department of Justice spokesperson told CNBC he’s “pretty sure” there’s no central database of cryptocurrency seizures.</p> <p>But what does appear clear is that more crypto seizure cases are being trumpeted to the public, like in the case of the FBI’s breach of a bitcoin wallet held by the Colonial Pipeline hackers earlier this year.</p> <p>“In my experience, folks that are in these positions in high levels of government, they may be there for a short period of time, and they want to get some wins under their belt,” said Welle. “This is the kind of thing that definitely captures the attention of journalists, cybersecurity experts.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 ‘Spilling the tea’ cyberbullying tactic
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/spilling-the-tea-the-cyberbullying-tactic-plauing-schools-parents-and-students-11639836002?mod=business_lead_pos11
GIST	<p>It’s like a scene straight out of the teen drama “Gossip Girl.” Middle-school students are creating anonymous Instagram accounts to dish on who’s dating, who’s cheating and who’s carrying weed in their backpack. In some cases, kids are posting photos of other kids, making fun of their hair or clothes. Some accounts spread rumors about students’ sexuality.</p> <p>The latest form of cyberbullying is occurring at schools across the country and, like other forms of bullying from the past, it can result in fights, social rejection and self harm.</p> <p>Parents are begging school administrators to shut down the accounts. Social-media networks tend to be responsive, especially where allegations of criminal behavior are concerned, but schools still say they’re overwhelmed. Even when Instagram shuts down the accounts, reporting them is like playing Whac-A-Mole—as soon as kids know that adults are aware of them, they delete the posts or the accounts and create new ones.</p> <p>Meanwhile, tension is rising between parents and educators over these gossip—aka “spilling the tea”—accounts, and resurfacing questions about who is responsible for students’ online social lives.</p> <p>Ultimately, online-safety experts say parents are responsible for what their kids do on their devices. There are things parents can do to mitigate the phenomenon—we’ll get to them below.</p> <p>‘Farb drama’</p> <p>Schools have been on high alert after threats of school shootings circulated on TikTok on Thursday; earlier this year some kids participated in TikTok challenges to vandalize bathrooms. Last month, when fights broke out every day for a week at Farb Middle School in San Diego, the first thing principal Courtney Rizzo thought was that it must be a new TikTok challenge.</p> <p>But a school employee alerted her to five “Farb drama” accounts—four on Instagram and one on TikTok—where students were spreading rumors about other kids and posting videos of the fights. Ms. Rizzo learned that students were saying something that angered two students for the purpose of instigating a fight, filming it and posting it.</p> <p>Ms. Rizzo emailed parents, urging them to be aware of their children’s social-media activity. The school also held assemblies on bullying and online safety, and created a task force for parents. She said that the fights have stopped, and students or their parents have removed the drama accounts. However, one Instagram account containing a video of a bathroom fight was still up as of Friday.</p>

Rich Wistocki is a retired police detective who spent 25 years investigating online child exploitation and now advises individual schools and school districts on cybersafety through his company, BeSure Consulting. He said a quarter of his clients have reported “tea” accounts being a problem this year. While some involve high schools, most of them are happening at the middle-school level, he and others say. He has learned of students who have switched schools or attempted suicide after being bullied on these accounts.

Many schools have policies stating that online activity that disrupts a student’s day is a school matter, even if it occurred outside of school hours. That’s why many districts are reporting these gossip accounts to Instagram and urging parents to talk to their kids.

Mr. Wistocki said social-media companies typically take down accounts that violate their terms within 24 hours. If criminal behavior is involved, he said, accounts usually get taken down within hours. When accounts involve criminal activity or are being used to incite violence, the school has a legal responsibility to report it to law enforcement as well, he added.

“Bullying isn’t allowed on Instagram, and we’ve developed industry-leading tools to stop this behavior and help people protect themselves,” said Liza Crenshaw, a spokeswoman for Instagram’s parent, [Meta Platforms Inc.](#) [FB -0.33%](#) “This behavior can be common with teens including on apps like Snapchat and TikTok, which is why we’ve called for a new industry body to create standards for age-appropriate experiences, age verification and parental controls.”

Sometimes schools can determine who’s behind an account by questioning the kids who follow it. In instances where Mr. Wistocki has been able to help a school determine a repeat offender’s identity, he gives a presentation about cyberbullying in that student’s homeroom. “That usually puts an end to it,” he said.

‘With a vengeance’

Cyberbullying is nothing new; it’s so common, [there’s even insurance](#) for it. But these gossip accounts, which often include a school’s name and the word “tea,” have been gaining in popularity this fall, as students returned to school buildings full time after more than a year of remote or hybrid learning.

“Kids were so suppressed in their ability to get together with other kids before this school year began,” Mr. Wistocki said. “Now that they’re back in school together, they want to establish their place as the popular person, the leader, and they’re doing it with a vengeance.”

Kids spread gossip about each other on Snapchat and TikTok, too, Mr. Wistocki said, but Instagram is primarily where he and school officials say they’re seeing the accounts. On Instagram, kids can easily send direct messages to the account holder who then posts the gossip, which remains up as long as the account does. On Snapchat, messages disappear quickly. And since TikTok is video-centric, it’s harder for users to remain anonymous, experts say.

When parents learn about these accounts, they look to schools to shut them down.

“I don’t know what kind of government authority they think we have, but we don’t have the ability to shut down Instagram accounts,” said Benjamin Horsley, a spokesman for the Granite School District in Salt Lake City. There are so many gossip accounts that one of the district’s social-media managers has been doing nothing but dealing with them. “We have one school that’s dealing with 30 of these accounts, and that’s just one school out of 24.”

SafeUT is a crisis text-and-phone line in Utah that people use to report anonymously if they’re feeling unsafe. It alerts schools when calls are from students. Mr. Horsley said the Granite School District so far this year has received twice as many crisis-line tips as it had by this time last year, and that a majority are related to cyberbullying and harassment.

What you can do

	<p>If you learn about online bullying involving students at your child’s school, it’s wise to alert administrators, but good digital citizenship begins at home.</p> <p>Remind kids of the basics. It may sound like a no-brainer, but online-safety professionals say it’s helpful to remind kids that behind every screen is another human, just like them, who has feelings. It’s also worth reminding kids that even if they think they’re posting anonymously, there is no such thing as true anonymity. Mr. Wistocki said friends often rat each other out.</p> <p>Teach kids to apologize. Decades in law enforcement taught Mr. Wistocki that kids learn a more powerful lesson when they own what they’ve done, rather than simply face punishment. Even when the kids he works with at schools are involved in criminal-level cyberbullying, he encourages schools not to expel them or press charges; he puts them through a program he created that involves writing a term paper, performing community service and writing apology letters to the kids they’ve hurt.</p> <p>Encourage kids to be “upstanders.” Even if your child isn’t the one being bullied or engaging in bullying, they don’t have to stand by and watch it happen. Diana Graber—who teaches cybersafety classes to parents and students and wrote a book, “Raising Humans in a Digital World: Helping Kids Build a Healthy Relationship With Technology”—said it’s important to teach kids to stand up for someone who’s being bullied. That can mean reporting bullying to a teacher or parent, reporting a gossip account to Instagram or reaching out to the victims to let them know they have a friend.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Islamic extremists still share in Facebook
SOURCE	https://www.politico.eu/article/islamic-extremists-facebook-content-social-media-islamic-state-terrorism/
GIST	<p>Photos of beheadings, extremist propaganda and violent hate speech related to Islamic State and the Taliban were shared for months within Facebook groups over the past year despite the social networking giant's claims it had increased efforts to remove such content.</p> <p>The posts — some tagged as “insightful” and “engaging” via new Facebook tools to promote community interactions — championed the Islamic extremists’ violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, including videos of suicide bombings and calls to attack rivals across the region and in the West, according to a review of social media activity between April and December. At least one of the groups contained more than 100,000 members.</p> <p>In several Facebook groups, competing Sunni and Shia militia trolled each other by posting pornographic images and other obscene photos into rival groups in the hope Facebook would remove those communities.</p> <p>In others, Islamic State supporters openly shared links to websites with reams of online terrorist propaganda, while pro-Taliban Facebook users posted regular updates about how the group took over Afghanistan during much of 2021, according to POLITICO’s analysis.</p> <p>During that time period, Facebook said it had invested heavily in artificial intelligence tools to automatically remove extremist content and hate speech in more than 50 languages. Since early 2021, the company told POLITICO it had added more Pashto and Dari speakers — the main languages spoken in Afghanistan — but declined to provide numbers of the staffing increases.</p> <p>Yet the scores of Islamic State and Taliban content still on the platform show those efforts have failed to stop extremists from exploiting the platform. Internal documents, made public three months ago by Frances Haugen, a Facebook whistleblower, showed the company’s researchers had warned that Facebook routinely failed to protect its users in some of the world’s most unstable countries, including Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.</p> <p>“It’s just too easy for me to find this stuff online,” said Moustafa Ayad, executive director for Africa, the Middle East and Asia at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a think tank that tracks online extremism, who</p>

discovered the Facebook extremist groups and shared his findings with POLITICO. “What happens in real life happens in the Facebook world,”

Many countries across the Middle East and Central Asia are torn by sectarian violence, and Islamic extremists have turned to Facebook as a weapon to promote their hate-filled agenda and rally supporters to their cause. Hundreds of these groups, varying in size from a few hundred members to tens of thousands of users, have sprouted up across the platform — in Arabic, Pashto and Dari — over the last 18 months.

When POLITICO flagged the open Facebook groups promoting Islamic extremist content to Meta, the parent company of Facebook, it removed them, including a pro-Taliban group that was created in the Spring and had grown to 107,000 members.

Yet within hours of its removal, a separate group supportive of the Islamic State had reappeared on Facebook, and again began to publish posts and images in favor of the banned extremist organization in direct breach of Facebook’s terms of service. Those groups were eventually removed after also being flagged.

“We recognize that our enforcement isn’t always perfect, which is why we’re reviewing a range of options to address these challenges,” Ben Walters, a Meta spokesperson, said in a statement.

A problem not solved

Much of the Islamic extremist content targeting these war-torn countries was written in local languages — an issue that researchers also flagged in internal documents made public by Haugen, who submitted them as disclosures made to the Securities and Exchange Commission and provided to the U.S. Congress. POLITICO and a consortium of news outlets reviewed the documents.

In late 2020, for instance, Facebook engineers discovered that just 6 percent of Arabic-language hate speech was flagged on Instagram, the photo-sharing service owned by Meta, before it was published online. That compared to a 40 percent takedown rate for similar material on Facebook.

In Afghanistan, where roughly five million people log onto the platform each month, the company had few local-language speakers to police content, according to a separate internal document published on December 17, 2020. Because of this lack of local personnel, less than 1 percent of hate speech was removed.

“There is a huge gap in the hate speech reporting process in local languages in terms of both accuracy and completeness of the translation of the entire reporting process,” the Facebook researchers concluded.

Yet a year after those findings, pro-Taliban content is routinely getting through the net.

In the now-deleted open Facebook group, with roughly 107,000 members, reviewed by POLITICO, scores of graphic videos and photos, with messages written in local languages, had been uploaded during much of 2021 in support of the Islamic group still officially banned from the platform because of its international designation as a terrorist group.

That included footage of Taliban fighters attacking forces loyal to the now-ousted Afghan government, while other pro-Taliban users praised such violence in comments that escaped moderation.

“There's clearly a problem here,” said Adam Hadley, director of Tech Against Terrorism, a nonprofit organization that works with smaller social networks, but not Facebook, in combating the rise of extremist content online.

He added he was not surprised that the social network was struggling to detect the extremist content because its automated content filters were not sophisticated enough to flag hate speech in Arabic, Pashto or Dari.

“When it comes to non-English language content, there’s a failure to focus enough machine language algorithm resources to combat this,” he added.

Battle between cyber armies

A significant portion of the recent Facebook group activity focused on digital fights between rival Sunni and Shia militia via Facebook in Iraq — a country continuing to suffer from widespread sectarian violence that has migrated onto the world’s largest social network.

That comes after separate internal Facebook documents from late 2020 raised concerns that so-called “cyber armies” between rival Sunni and Shia groups were using the platform in Iraq to attack each other online.

In several Facebook groups over at least the last 90 days, these battles were playing out, in almost real-time, as Iran- and Islamic State-backed extremists peppered each other’s online communities with sexual images and other graphic content, according to Ayad, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue researcher.

In one, which included militants from both sides of the fight, Shia Iraqi militants goaded Islamic State rivals with photos of scantily-clad women and sectarian slurs, while in the same Facebook group, Islamic State supporters similarly posted derogatory memes attacking local rivals.

“It’s essentially trolling,” said Ayad. “It annoys the group members and similarly gets someone in moderation to take note, but the groups often don’t get taken down. That’s what happens when there’s a lack of content moderation.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 Federal agency compromised; APT attack
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/us-federal-agency-compromised-in-suspected-apt-attack/
GIST	<p>A sophisticated threat actor has gained access and has backdoored the internal network of a US federal government agency, antivirus maker Avast reported this week.</p> <p>The security firm did not name the agency in its report, but <i>The Record</i> understands that the target of the attack was the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).</p> <p>According to its website, the USCIRF is tasked with monitoring the right to freedom of religion and belief abroad and then making policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and US Congress.</p> <p>The agency has a primary role in shaping US policy in regards to human rights violations and possible sanctions that the US may impose on misbehaving states, and as a result, it is very likely to have access to reports of current abuses across the world.</p> <p>But despite the sensitive nature of the data it processes, Avast said in a report on Thursday that the agency was unresponsive after notifying it of a security breach of its internal network.</p> <p>Backdoor and traffic interception malware discovered</p> <p>Avast researchers said they found traces of two malicious files on its network that effectively granted attackers full control over internal systems.</p> <p>“[B]ased on our analysis of the files in question, we believe it’s reasonable to conclude that the attackers were able to intercept and possibly exfiltrate all local network traffic in this organization,” the Avast team said.</p> <p>“This could include information exchanged with other US government agencies and other international governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focused on international rights.”</p> <p>“We also have indications that the attackers could run code of their choosing in the operating system’s context on infected systems, giving them complete control,” the Czech security firm added.</p>

	<p>Avast said that because the agency refused to interact with its researchers, it couldn't elaborate on the entire attack chain beyond the two files it detected.</p> <p>However, the security firm said it believes the attack was “a classic APT-type operation,” where APT stands for “advanced persistent threat,” a term used by the cybersecurity industry to describe state-sponsored groups.</p> <p>Researchers said they noted some thin connections to Operation Red Signature, a report published in 2018 by Trend Micro, but the evidence was not enough to make a formal attribution without a more extensive view into the current attack.</p> <p><i>The Record</i> has sent a request for comment to the USCIRF but has not heard back from the agency.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 DHS issues emergency directive Log4j flaw
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/log4j-emergency-directive-cisa-conti/
GIST	<p>U.S. cyber officials issued an emergency directive Friday giving all federal civilian agencies until Dec. 23 to assess their internet-facing networks for the Apache Log4j vulnerability and immediately patch the systems, or take other measures to mitigate the software flaw.</p> <p>The directive, issued by the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, comes in response to “the active exploitation by multiple threat actors” of the Log4j bug, which has roiled the information security community since it emerged Dec. 10 as a vulnerability in widely used logging software. The directive also requires agencies to report to CISA by Dec. 28 all software applications affected by the bug by name and version, and what actions were taken.</p> <p>“The log4j vulnerabilities pose an unacceptable risk to federal network security,” CISA Director Jen Easterly said in a statement. “If you are using a vulnerable product on your network, you should consider your door wide open to any number of threats.”</p> <p>The directive is based on current exploitation of the Log4j vulnerabilities, the likelihood of exploitation, the prevalence of affected software among federal agencies, and the potential impact of a successful compromise, Easterly's statement said.</p> <p>The directive, first reported by CNN, comes amid escalating concern about how hackers would leverage the vulnerability to launch ransomware attacks or take remote control of affected systems. In comments first reported by CyberScoop, Easterly said Dec. 14 that the bug was perhaps “the most serious” she'd seen in her career, and expected it to be “widely exploited.” Another top CISA official, Jay Gazlay, estimated that hundreds of millions of devices” were likely to be affected.</p> <p>The same day, threat intelligence analysts at Microsoft and cybersecurity firm Mandiant said they'd seen indications that nation-state hackers associated with the governments of China, Iran, North Korea and Turkey had begun to experiment with and leverage the bug in hacking campaigns.</p> <p>On Friday, cybersecurity firm AdvIntel posted an analysis stating that hackers working with the Conti ransomware group, one of the most prolific and concerning ransomware operations, started to use the vulnerability in active ransomware attacks on Dec. 15.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 New local attack vector expands Log4j flaw
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/new-local-attack-vector-expands-attack.html
GIST	Cybersecurity researchers have discovered an entirely new attack vector that enables adversaries to exploit the Log4Shell vulnerability on servers locally by using a JavaScript WebSocket connection.

"This newly-discovered attack vector means that anyone with a vulnerable Log4j version on their machine or local private network can browse a website and potentially trigger the vulnerability," Matthew Warner, CTO of Blumira, [said](#). "At this point, there is no proof of active exploitation. This vector significantly expands the attack surface and can impact services even running as localhost which were not exposed to any network."

[WebSockets](#) allow for two-way communications between a web browser (or other client application) and a server, unlike HTTP, which is unidirectional where the client sends the request and the server sends the response.

While the issue can be resolved by updating all local development and internet-facing environments to Log4j 2.16.0, Apache on Friday rolled out [version 2.17.0](#), which remediates a denial-of-service (DoS) vulnerability tracked as CVE-2021-45105 (CVSS score: 7.5), making it the third Log 4j2 flaw to come to light after [CVE-2021-45046](#) and [CVE-2021-44228](#).

The complete list of flaws discovered to date in the logging framework after the original [Log4Shell](#) remote code execution bug was disclosed is as follows —

- [CVE-2021-44228](#) (CVSS score: 10.0) - A remote code execution vulnerability affecting Log4j versions from 2.0-beta9 to 2.14.1 (Fixed in version 2.15.0)
- [CVE-2021-45046](#) (CVSS score: 9.0) - An information leak and remote code execution vulnerability affecting Log4j versions from 2.0-beta9 to 2.15.0, excluding 2.12.2 (Fixed in version 2.16.0)
- [CVE-2021-45105](#) (CVSS score: 7.5) - A denial-of-service vulnerability affecting Log4j versions from 2.0-beta9 to 2.16.0 (Fixed in version 2.17.0)
- [CVE-2021-4104](#) (CVSS score: 8.1) - An untrusted deserialization flaw affecting Log4j version 1.2 (No fix available; Upgrade to version 2.17.0)

"We shouldn't be surprised that additional vulnerabilities were discovered in Log4j given the additional specific focus on the library," Jake Williams, CTO and co-founder of incident response firm BreachQuest, said. "Similar to Log4j, this summer the original [PrintNightmare](#) vulnerability disclosure led to the discovery of multiple additional distinct vulnerabilities. The discovery of additional vulnerabilities in Log4j shouldn't cause concern about the security of log4j itself. If anything, Log4j is more secure because of the additional attention paid by researchers."

The latest development comes as a number of threat actors have piled on the Log4j flaws to mount a variety of attacks, including ransomware infections involving the Russia-based Conti group and a new ransomware strain named Khonsari. What's more, the Log4j remote code execution flaw has also opened the door to a third ransomware family known as TellYouThePass that's being used in attacks against Windows and Linux devices, according to researchers from [Sangfor](#) and [Curated Intel](#).

Bitdefender Honeypots Signal Active Log4Shell 0-Day Attacks Underway

The easily exploited, ubiquitous vulnerability, aside from spawning as many as 60 variations, has presented a perfect window of opportunity for adversaries, with Romanian cybersecurity firm Bitdefender noting that more than 50% of the attacks are leveraging the Tor anonymity service to mask their true origins.

"In other words, threat actors exploiting Log4j are routing their attacks through machines that are closer to their intended targets and just because we don't see countries commonly associated with cybersecurity threats at the top of the list does not mean that attacks did not originate there," Martin Zugec, technical solutions director at Bitdefender, [said](#).

According to telemetry data collected between December 11 and December 15, Germany and the U.S. alone accounted for 60% of all the exploitation attempts. The most common attack targets during the observation period were the U.S., Canada, the U.K., Romania, Germany, Australia, France, the Netherlands, Brazil, and Italy.

Google: Over 35,000 Java Packages Affected by the Log4j Flaw

The development also coincides with an analysis from Google's Open Source Insights Team, which found that roughly 35,863 Java packages — accounting for over 8% of the Maven Central repository — use vulnerable versions of the Apache Log4j library. Of the affected artifacts, only around 7,000 packages have a direct dependency on Log4j.

"User's lack of visibility into their dependencies and transitive dependencies has made patching difficult; it has also made it difficult to determine the full blast radius of this vulnerability," Google's James Wetter and Nicky Ringland [said](#). But on the positive side of things, 2,620 of the impacted packages have already been fixed less than a week after disclosure.

"There will likely be some time before we understand the full fallout of the log4j vulnerability, but only because it's embedded in so much software," Williams said. "This has nothing to do with threat actor malware. It has to do with the difficulty in finding the myriad places the library is embedded. The vulnerability itself will provide initial access for threat actors who will later perform privilege escalation and lateral movement — that's where the real risk is."

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HEADLINE	12/19 New Joker malware app from Play Store
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2021/12/over-500000-android-users-downloaded.html
GIST	<p>A malicious Android app with more than 500,000 downloads from the Google Play app store has been found hosting malware that stealthily exfiltrates users' contact lists to an attacker-controlled server and signs up users to unwanted paid premium subscriptions without their knowledge.</p> <p>The latest Joker malware was found in a messaging-focused app named Color Message ("com.guo.smscolor.amessage"), which has since been removed from the official app marketplace. In addition, it has been observed simulating clicks in order to generate revenue from malicious ads and connecting to servers located in Russia.</p> <p>Color Message "accesses users' contact list and exfiltrates it over the network [and] automatically subscribes to unwanted paid services," mobile security firm Pradeo noted. "To make it difficult to be removed, the application has the capability to hide its icon once installed."</p> <p>"We are [sic] committed to ensuring that the app is as useful and efficient as possible," the developers behind Color Message state in their terms and conditions. "For that reason, we reserve the right to make changes to the app or to charge for its services, at any time and for any reason. We will never charge you for the app or its services without making it very clear to you exactly what you're paying for."</p> <p>Joker, since its discovery in 2017, has been a notorious fleeceware infamous for carrying out an array of malicious activities, including billing fraud and intercepting SMS messages, contact details, and device information unbeknownst to users.</p> <p>The rogue apps have continued to skirt Google Play protections using a barrage of evasion tactics to the point that Android's Security and Privacy Team said the malware authors "have at some point used just about every cloaking and obfuscation technique under the sun in an attempt to go undetected."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Germany, US top origin Log4j attacks
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/cloud-security/germany-and-us-are-top-two-countries-of-origin-for-log4j-attacks
GIST	In a surprise twist, Bitdefender researchers reported on Friday that after analyzing honeypot data, they found that Western countries such as Germany and the United States were listed as the top sources of the Log4j attacks.

So the threat actors exploiting [Log4j](#) are routing their attacks through machines that are closer to their intended targets and just because the Bitdefender researchers didn't see countries commonly associated with cybersecurity threats such as China and Iran at the top of the list does not mean the attacks did not originate there," said Martin Zugec, technical solutions director at Bitdefender.

The [Bitdefender team](#) said in a [blog post](#) that its honeypots were attacked 36,000 times from Dec. 9 to Dec. 16; that more than 50% of the attacks are using The Onion Router (TOR) network to mask true country origin; and that based on endpoint telemetry, the top two countries of origin were Germany, at 34%, and the United States, at 26%. Finally, the lead attack targets were the United States at 48%, followed by the United Kingdom and Canada, both at 8%.

"TOR has long been a fundamental part of the dark web because of its ability to hide user identity and activities, so it's no surprise cybercriminals frequently use it to launch attacks," Zugec said. "Also the Western countries don't actively block TOR networks for non-criminal activities and censorship. A large part of the TOR network is based in Germany, France, and the Netherlands."

According to the researchers, their first thought was that the Western countries are known for hosting infrastructure-as-a-service data centers, so many of these attacks were possibly coming from ephemeral virtual machines. The Bitdefender team started looking at Amazon/Azure/Google Cloud Platform regions and source addresses, but only a small percentage of these attacks originated from the leading cloud service providers.

Next, the researchers identified a significant number of source IPs as exit nodes for TOR. After analyzing the unique source IP addresses, more than 50% were identified as TOR exit nodes. The researchers say this means the attackers are using a network of virtual tunnels to stay anonymous and prevent disclosing their origin location.

In other Log4j news today, Blumira's [security team discovered](#) the potential for an alternative attack vector for Log4j that relies on a JavaScript WebSocket connection to trigger the remote code execution (RCE) on internal and locally-exposed unpatched Log4j applications.

The researchers said previously that they understood the impact of Log4j was limited to vulnerable servers. This new vector means that anyone with a vulnerable Log4j version on their machine or local private network can potentially browse a website and trigger the vulnerability. The researchers were also clear: At this point there's no proof of an active exploit.

Jake Williams, co-founder and chief technology officer at BreachQuest, added that WebSockets have previously been used for port scanning internal systems, but this represents one of the first RCE exploits being relayed by WebSockets.

"This shouldn't change anyone's position on vulnerability management," Williams said. "Organizations should be pushing to patch quickly and mitigate by preventing outbound connections from potentially vulnerable services where patching is not an option."

Finally, on Wednesday, researchers from [Praetorian reported](#) that the [second Log4j vulnerability](#) made public on Tuesday by the Apache Foundation which said that attackers could launch a denial of service attack also had the potential for attackers to exfiltrate data.

Praetorian passed the information to [the Apache Foundation](#) and strongly recommends that security teams install the [2.16.0](#) patch as quickly as possible.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Russian groups exploit Log4Shell flaw
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/russian-cyberspy-groups-start-exploiting-log4shell-vulnerability

Russia has been added to the list of nation states targeting the recently disclosed Log4Shell vulnerability, with exploitation attempts linked to several of the country's cyberespionage groups.

Exploitation of the Log4j vulnerability tracked as CVE-2021-44228, Log4Shell and LogJam started in early December, with initial attack reports describing activity associated with profit-driven cybercriminals delivering cryptocurrency miners, DDoS malware, ransomware and other malicious programs.

Then, on December 14, Mandiant reported seeing [Chinese and Iranian](#) state-sponsored threat actors exploiting the Log4Shell flaw. The next day, Microsoft said it had observed activity that it had [connected to China, Iran, North Korea and Turkey](#).

On Friday, cybersecurity rating and risk management company SecurityScorecard reported [seeing reconnaissance activity](#) apparently linked to Chinese and Russian APTs. In the case of China, the company named APT10, and in the case of Russia it mentioned APT28, Turla, Ursnif and Grizzly Steppe.

Interestingly, SecurityScorecard's analysis also showed IP addresses that were previously tied to Drovorub domains. [Drovorub is a mysterious piece of malware](#) that U.S. intelligence agencies linked to Russia's APT28 in the summer of 2020. The NSA and FBI issued a warning at the time, but as of February 2021 none of the major cybersecurity firms contacted by SecurityWeek had found any actual samples of the malware.

In addition to cyberspy groups, Advintel reported that the notorious Conti ransomware group had been [leveraging Log4Shell](#) against VMware vCenter servers for lateral movement.

CVE-2021-45046 becomes critical

CVE-2021-44228 was patched on December 6 with the release of Log4j 2.15.0. However, it was soon discovered that the fix was incomplete in certain non-default configurations, and exploitation could still lead to denial-of-service (DoS) attacks "or worse."

[A new CVE identifier](#), CVE-2021-45046, was assigned to this issue, and another round of updates was released — versions 2.12.2 and 2.16.0 — to patch this vulnerability and disable access to the functionality abused in attacks.

CVE-2021-45046 was initially assigned a CVSS score of 3.7, but after further analysis it has been assigned a CVSS of 9, which makes it "critical severity." Its severity rating was [upgraded](#) after researchers [discovered](#) that its exploitation could lead to [information leaks](#), local code execution and remote code execution.

Cloudflare said on Wednesday that it had seen exploitation attempts [targeting CVE-2021-45046](#). *SecurityWeek* reached out to the company on Friday for more information on these attacks, but they couldn't share any data.

On Thursday, Cloudflare reported a [surge in Log4Shell attacks](#), with the company seeing more than 100,000 attempts per minute during certain times of day.

It's worth noting that log4j 2.16.0 patches both CVE-2021-44228 and CVE-2021-45046 — affected organizations are advised to update the logging utility to this version.

It also came to light recently that the Log4Shell vulnerability can be exploited by getting the target to access a malicious website — not only by sending specially crafted requests to vulnerable servers — but currently there is no evidence that this method has been used for malicious purposes.

One week after Log4Shell was disclosed, a scanning of enterprise cloud environments conducted by cloud security company Wiz found that only 30% of vulnerable resources have been patched.

HEADLINE	12/17 Illinois-based accountancy firm exposed
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/bk-issues-cyberattack-notice/
GIST	<p>Data belonging to an Illinois-based accountancy firm has been exposed in a cyber-attack.</p> <p>Bansley and Kiener, which is also known as B&K, is a 99-year-old full-service accounting firm headquartered in Chicago.</p> <p>Earlier this month, B&K issued a security notice stating that it had been successfully targeted by cyber-criminals using ransomware a year ago.</p> <p>"On December 10, 2020, B&K identified a data security incident that resulted in the encryption of certain systems within our environment," stated B&K in its security notice.</p> <p>Upon discovering the digital incursion, the firm took steps to halt the ransomware's spread and to recover data that had been encrypted in the attack. B&K also beefed up its cybersecurity measures.</p> <p>Believing the malware to be contained, the firm set out to determine how the incident had occurred and whether any data had been stolen by the attack's perpetrators.</p> <p>Initially, B&K believed that none of its data had fallen into the hands of the cyber-criminals behind the attack, but the firm found out later that this was not the case.</p> <p>"B&K addressed the incident, made upgrades to certain aspects of our computer security, restored the impacted systems from recent backups, and resumed normal operation," said the firm.</p> <p>"We believed at the time that the incident was fully contained and did not find any evidence that information had been exfiltrated from our environment. On May 24, 2021, we were made aware that certain information had been exfiltrated from our environment by an unauthorized person."</p> <p>After hearing the bad news, B&K launched an investigation, engaging the services of a cybersecurity firm to discover more about the attack's impact.</p> <p>A year on from the attack, the accountancy firm said it "cannot confirm specifically what information, if any, was viewed by the unauthorized person" who accessed its IT systems.</p> <p>However, B&K did state that on August 24, investigators were able to confirm that information present on the firm's systems at the time of the ransomware attack "included names and Social Security numbers."</p> <p>The incident has been reported to the HHS' Office for Civil Rights in four reports as affecting a total of 70,941 individuals.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Spider-Man movie exploited in scams
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/spider-man-no-way-home-phishing-malware-scam/
GIST	<p>Since the dawn of the COVID-19 era, online streaming of films has increased significantly. This has provided scammers with an exclusive new opportunity to exploit the most anticipated released through scams and infected pirated versions.</p> <p>Black Widow, John Wick 3, Joker, and Contagion have already become the victims of online scams, and the latest to join the list is the new Spider-Man: No Way Home movie.</p> <p>Scammers Taking Advantage of New Spiderman Movie</p> <p>Reportedly, scammers are exploiting the latest superhero release, Spider-Man: No Way Home, released earlier this week, to spread phishing sites and malicious files.</p>

Ahead of the movie's premiere, researchers at Kaspersky noted an intensified activity from scammers as numerous phishing sites popped up offering exclusive copies of the movie before its release. Kaspersky security expert Tatyana Shcherbakova noted how cybercriminals exploit the hype and excitement surrounding the movie.

"Fans' expectations are through the roof right now, arguably higher than for any film. Everyone who has ever been a fan of Spider-Man has their own theories about the films, which can be exploited by cybercriminals."

How are Users Scammed?

Kaspersky researchers reported that [phishing websites](#) urged users to enter their credit card data at registration to access the movie. After the unsuspecting user entered this information, fraudsters debited the money and stole payment card data. However, the victims couldn't access the movie.

Furthermore, cybercriminals lure fans into downloading malicious documents such as downloaders by making them believe they were downloading the movie. These downloaders install numerous programs, including trojans and [adware](#).

Trojans would let attackers gain extended privileges on the infected device and perform actions that the user hasn't authorized the software, for instance, impacting the computer's performance or modifying the data.

"To boost interest in the phishing pages, fraudsters do not use official posters from the film, but rather fan art featuring all the Spider-Man actors. With such posters, cybercriminals want to attract more attention from fans," researchers noted.

Scammers are also leveraging fan theories and rumors to monetize from the latest superhero flick. Such as, they are exploiting the news that Andrew Garfield and Toby Maguire are making a comeback in the franchise.

"Forgetting about cybersecurity, the audience is in a hurry to find out the secrets of the premiere movie, and fraudsters are using fan arts and trailer cuttings as bait to make victims download malicious files and enter banking details. We encourage users to be alert to the pages they visit and not download files from unverified sites," Kaspersky's report read.

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HEADLINE	12/18 Sennheiser exposes customers data
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/german-audio-tech-sennheiser-expose-customers-data/
GIST	<p>According to a report from vpnMentor, the German audio equipment manufacturer, Sennheiser left an unsecured Amazon Web Services (AWS) server online. The server stored around 55GB of information on over 28,000 Sennheiser customers.</p> <p>AWS buckets are popular among businesses that require storing large data files. However, defining the security settings for AWS S3 buckets is highly important, which according to vpnMentor, Sennheiser failed to ensure.</p> <p>Personal data of Sennheiser customers exposed</p> <p>VpnMentor reports that Sennheiser used an AWS S3 bucket to store large data files comprising data collected from its customers. According to vpnMentor's researchers Noam Rotem and Ran Locar, the database was an old cloud account containing data of 28,000 customers and collected between 2015-2018; however, the database was dormant since 2018.</p> <p>The database could be old, but the information would be precious to cybercriminals, researchers noted in their report. They contacted Sennheiser on 28 October 2021 to inform them about the unprotected server and leaked data.</p>

	<p>About the Data</p> <p>Researchers noted that the bucket contained data from individuals and businesses requesting Sennheiser’s product samples. The database included full names, email IDs, home addresses, phone numbers, employee names, and company names.</p> <p>This kind of data is sufficient for cybercriminals to perform various attacks such as phishing scams or identity theft. The exposed AWS server was secured by Sennheiser promptly, but it is concerning that such sensitive data was open to public access for such a long time.</p> <p><i>“Once we confirmed that Sennheiser was responsible for the data breach, we contacted the company to notify it and offer our assistance. Sennheiser replied a few days later and asked us to give details of our findings.</i></p> <p><i>We disclosed the URL to the unsecured server and provided further detail about what it contained. Despite not hearing back from the company again, the server was secured a few hours later,” vpnMentor’s report read.</i></p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Grim Finance hacked; \$30M tokens stolen
SOURCE	https://www.hackread.com/grim-finance-hacked-30-million-stolen/
GIST	<p>Grim Finance, a DeFi protocol, and Smart Yield Optimizer Platform has announced that the platform was hacked Saturday 18th in an “advanced attack” that allowed hackers to steal over \$30 million worth of Fantom Tokens.</p> <p>In a series of tweets, Grim Finance explained that the attack was possible because unknown attackers exploited a flaw in its vault contract. Resultantly, the platform has paused all the vaults to avoid further damage as deposited funds are currently at risk.</p> <p>“The attacker attacked using the function titled beforeDeposit() from our vault strategy entering a malicious token contract,” the Grim team said.</p> <p>Although, all vaults have been paused Grim Finance is allowing users to withdraw their funds by unpausing some.</p> <p>Additionally, the Grim team has contacted Circle (USDC), DAI, and AnySwap regarding the attacker’s address to potentially freeze any further fund transfers.</p> <p>Grim Finance is yet another addition to the list of crypto platforms that have suffered massive security breaches. On November 8th, hackers managed to steal \$55 million worth of cryptocurrency from DeFi lender bZx through a phishing attack.</p> <p>In another attack, on December 17th, the Ascendex cryptocurrency exchange announced it was hacked and attackers stole a whopping \$77 million by exploiting a vulnerability to access its hot wallets.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Credit card info in sports gear sites stolen
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/credit-card-info-of-18-million-people-stolen-from-sports-gear-sites/
GIST	<p>Four affiliated online sports gear sites have disclosed a cyberattack where threat actors stole credit cards for 1,813,224 customers.</p> <p>While not much is known about the attack, a law firm representing the four websites stated that personal information and credit card information, including full CVV, were stolen on October 1st, 2021.</p>

The affected websites are the following:

- [Tackle Warehouse LLC](https://tacklewarehouse.com) (tacklewarehouse.com) – Fishing gear
- [Running Warehouse LLC](https://runningwarehouse.com) (runningwarehouse.com) – Running apparel
- [Tennis Warehouse LCC](https://tennis-warehouse.com) (tennis-warehouse.com) – Tennis apparel
- [Skate Warehouse LLC](https://skatewarehouse.com) (skatewarehouse.com) – Skateboards and skating apparel

The sites first learned of the breach on October 15th, and after an investigation, confirmed on November 29th the customers that had their payment information stolen.

The details that have been compromised as a result of this incident are the following:

- Full name
- Financial account number
- Credit card number (with CVV)
- Debit card number (with CVV)
- Website account password

After the conclusion of the investigation, the websites sent notices to the affected individuals on December 16th, 2021.

None of the published notices to impacted customers provide any details on the nature of the incident, so the actual means of obtaining the data remains unknown.

However, as the description states, "External system breach (hacking)," this appears close to be a database breach rather than the implantation of card skimmers on the websites, although both scenarios are likely.

Whatever the case is, if you have purchased anything from these four websites, you should treat incoming communications with vigilance, monitor your bank account and credit card statements, and report any suspicious transactions immediately.

"Upon becoming aware of the incident, Tackle Warehouse took the measures referenced above. We also reported the incident to the payment card brands in an attempt to prevent fraudulent activity on the affected accounts," reads Tackle's notification letter to customers.

"We also reported the incident to law enforcement and have worked closely with the digital forensics firm to enhance the security of our sites to facilitate safe and secure transactions."

Unfortunately, the affected customers have not been offered an identity protection service this time, even though the compromised data is extremely sensitive information.

We have reached out to all the affected entities to learn more about the attack, and we will update this post as soon as we receive a response.

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HEADLINE	12/17 TellYouThePass ransomware revived; spike
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/tellyouthepass-ransomware-revived-in-linux-windows-log4j-attacks/
GIST	<p>Threat actors have revived an old and relatively inactive ransomware family known as TellYouThePass, deploying it in attacks against Windows and Linux devices targeting a critical remote code execution bug in the Apache Log4j library.</p> <p>KnownSec 404 Team's Heige first reported these attacks on Twitter on Monday after observing that the ransomware was dropped on old Windows systems using exploits abusing the flaw tracked as CVE-2021-44228 and known as Log4Shell.</p>

Heige's report was confirmed by the Sangfor Threat Intelligence Team, who successfully captured one of the TellyouThePass ransomware samples deployed in attacks using Log4Shell exploits mostly impacting Chinese targets, according to [Curated Intelligence](#).

As they further discovered (findings that [CronUP's Germán Fernández](#) also confirmed), the ransomware has a Linux version that harvests SSH keys and moves laterally throughout victims' networks.

"It is worth noting that this is not the first time that Tellyouthepass ransomware has used high-risk vulnerabilities to launch attacks," [Sangfor researchers said](#). "As early as last year, it had used Eternal Blue vulnerabilities to attack multiple organizational units."

Other security researchers [[1](#), [2](#)] have also analyzed one of the ransomware samples deployed in these attacks and tagged it as "likely belonging" to the TellyouThePass family.

According to submission stats to the ID Ransomware service, [TellyouThePass ransomware](#) has seen a massive and [sudden spike](#) in activity after [Log4Shell proof-of-concept exploits were released online](#).

Log4Shell exploited in ransomware attacks

TellyouThePass is not the first ransomware strain deployed in Log4Shell attacks since financially-motivated attackers began [injecting Monero miners](#) on compromised systems and [state-backed hackers started exploiting it](#) to create footholds for follow-on activity.

BitDefender first reported [they found a new ransomware family](#) (tagged by some as a wiper) they dubbed Khonsari being installed directly via Log4Shell exploits.

The Microsoft 365 Defender Threat Intelligence Team also saw Khonsari ransomware payloads [dropped on self-hosted Minecraft servers](#).

Last but not least, [Conti ransomware operators have also added a Log4Shell exploit to their arsenal](#) to move laterally through targets' networks, gain access to VMware vCenter Server instances, and encrypt virtual machines.

In related news, [CISA ordered Federal Civilian Executive Branch agencies today](#) to patch their systems against the Log4Shell vulnerability within the next six days, until December 23.

The cybersecurity agency has also recently added the flaw to its [Known Exploited Vulnerabilities Catalog](#), which also requires expedited action from federal agencies to mitigate the bug until December 24.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Chinese hackers eye transportation sector
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/trend-micro-spots-chinese-hackers-targeting-transportation-sector?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Since the middle of 2020, a Chinese state-sponsored threat actor called 'Tropic Trooper' has been targeting transportation organizations and government entities related to transportation sector, Trend Micro reports.</p> <p>Also known as Earth Centaur and KeyBoy, the advanced persistent threat (APT) has been around since 2011, conducting espionage campaigns against organizations in government, healthcare, high-tech, and transportation sectors in Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Taiwan.</p> <p>As part of the attacks conducted over the past year and a half, Trend Micro warned that the group attempted to access flight schedules, financial plans, and other internal documents at the target organizations, as well as any personal information available on the compromised hosts, including search histories.</p>

Trend Micro's monitoring of the group revealed red teamwork proficiency, as the adversary can easily bypass security settings, prevent its activities from becoming obstructive, and employ reverse proxies that are used to bypass network security systems.

The APT has also been observed using open-source frameworks, which allows it to easily come up with new backdoor variants, and likely employs the same tactics in attacks on other industries as well, the Trend Micro researchers explained.

Tropic Trooper uses a multi-stage infection process, in which Internet Information Services (IIS) and Microsoft Exchange vulnerabilities (including ProxyLogon) are exploited for intrusion. Next, the attackers install web shells and deploy the Nerapack .NET loader and the Quasar RAT as the first stage malware.

Different types of second-stage backdoors, including ChiserClient and SmileSvr, are deployed, based on the victim. The attackers then begin Active Directory (AD) discovery, leverage Server Message Block (SMB) to spread across the network, and attempt to harvest login credentials.

“We found that the threat group developed multiple backdoors capable of communication via common network protocols. We think this indicates that it has the capability to bypass network security systems by using these common protocols to transfer data. We also found that the group tries to launch various backdoors per victim,” Trend Micro said.

Based on commands received from the command and control (C&C) server, the employed backdoors can download files, write/read files, open command shells for command execution, upload files, list directories and files, and more. Based on the victim, backdoors that support different protocols are used.

“These threat actors are notably sophisticated and well-equipped. Looking deeper into the new methods the group uses, we found that it has an arsenal of tools capable of assessing and then compromising its targets while remaining under the radar,” Trend Micro added.

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HEADLINE	12/20 How China manipulates Facebook, Twitter
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/20/technology/china-facebook-twitter-influence-manipulation.html
GIST	<p>Flood global social media with fake accounts used to advance an authoritarian agenda. Make them look real and grow their numbers of followers. Seek out online critics of the state — and find out who they are and where they live.</p> <p>China’s government has unleashed a global online campaign to burnish its image and undercut accusations of human rights abuses. Much of the effort takes place in the shadows, behind the guise of bot networks that generate automatic posts and hard-to-trace online personas.</p> <p>Now, a new set of documents reviewed by The New York Times reveals in stark detail how Chinese officials tap private businesses to generate content on demand, draw followers, track critics and provide other services for information campaigns. That operation increasingly plays out on international platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which the Chinese government blocks at home.</p> <p>The documents, which were part of a request for bids from contractors, offer a rare glimpse into how China’s vast bureaucracy works to spread propaganda and to sculpt opinion on global social media. They were taken offline after The Times contacted the Chinese government about them.</p> <p>On May 21, a branch of the Shanghai police posted a notice online seeking bids from private contractors for what is known among Chinese officialdom as public opinion management. Officials have relied on tech contractors to help them keep up with domestic social media and actively shape public opinion via censorship and the dissemination of fake posts at home. Only recently have officials and the opinion management industry turned their attention beyond China.</p>

Shanghai police is looking to create hundreds of fake accounts on Twitter, Facebook and other major social media platforms. The police department emphasizes that the task is time sensitive, suggesting that it wants to be ready to unleash the accounts quickly to steer discussion.

Bot-like networks of accounts such as those that the Shanghai police wants to buy have driven an online surge in pro-China traffic over the past two years. Sometimes the social media posts from those networks bolster official government accounts with likes or reposts. Other times they attack social media users who are critical of government policies.

Recently, Facebook [took down 500 accounts](#) after they were used to spread comments from a Swiss biologist by the name of Wilson Edwards, who had purportedly written that the United States was interfering with the World Health Organization's efforts to track the origins of the coronavirus pandemic. The Swiss embassy in Beijing said Wilson Edwards did not exist, but the fake scientist's accusations had already been quoted by Chinese state media.

The Shanghai police's social media effort is not just a numbers game, and this portion of the document underscores efforts to shift from brute-force tactics like using bot armies to something more subversive. The police department is seeking an upgrade in sophistication and power: a series of accounts with organic followers that can be turned to government aims whenever necessary.

The request suggested that police officials understood the need for strong engagement with the public through these profiles-for-hire. The deeper engagement lends the fake personas credibility at a time when social media companies are increasingly taking down accounts that seem inauthentic or coordinated.

Bot networks that have been linked to China's government stand out for their lack of engagement with other accounts, disinformation experts say. Though they can be used to troll others and boost the number of likes on official government posts, most of those automated accounts have little influence individually since they have few followers.

The authorities used a phrase common among China's internet police that refers to tracking down the actual person behind a social media account: "touching the ground."

With growing frequency, the country's internet police has hunted down and threatened internet users who voice their opinions. At first, its agents focused on local social media platforms. In 2018, they began a new campaign to detain users of Twitter inside China — account owners who had found ways around the government's blocks — and force them to delete their accounts.

Now, the campaign has extended to Chinese citizens who live outside of China. The document spells out how the Shanghai police wants to discover the identities of people behind certain accounts and to trace their users' connections to the mainland. Its officers can then threaten family members in China or detain the account holders when they return to the country in order to compel online critics to delete posts or even entire accounts.

In previous Chinese information campaigns, bot-like accounts have been used to add an unrealistic number of likes and retweets to government and state media posts. The contrived flurry of traffic can make the posts more likely to be shown by recommendation algorithms on many social media sites and search engines.

In recent weeks, a similar pattern emerged from a network of [bot-like accounts amplifying evidence](#) that was issued by state-media journalists, purporting to show that tennis player Peng Shuai was safe, freely eating dinner in Beijing and attending a youth tennis tournament.

The Shanghai police explains very clearly the functionality that the department desires, demonstrating a familiarity with recommendation algorithms on social media. Its approach underscores something that

propaganda officials know well: A cluster of junk accounts can briefly make one post from an official account appear to go viral, giving it greater exposure and lending it credibility.

As overseas Chinese propaganda campaigns have developed, they have come to rely more on visual media. Officials are looking for a company to not only maintain and deploy fake accounts, but to also generate original content. The demand for videos is high.

A separate document reviewed by The Times shows that the same local branch of Shanghai police [purchased](#) video-making services from a different company in November. The police asked the supplier to provide at least 20 videos a month and to distribute those on domestic and overseas social media. The document referred to the task as original video production that would be used to fight the “battle of public opinion.”

Earlier this year, a New York Times and ProPublica analysis showed how [thousands of videos portraying members of the Uyghur](#) ethnic minority living happy and free lives were a key part of an information campaign that Twitter ultimately attributed to the Chinese Communist Party. When Twitter took down the network behind those posts, it took down accounts linked to a contractor that it said helped shoot propaganda videos. A Twitter spokesperson declined to comment.

Three weeks after the Shanghai police department’s request became public, a company called Shanghai Cloud Link won the bid, the documents show. In its pitch, the company listed itself as having just 20 employees. According to the LinkedIn page of its founder, Wei Guolin, the company works with multinational firms and provides services in “digital government” and “smart cities.”

Mr. Wei did not respond to a request for comment. The Shanghai Pudong Public Security Bureau did not respond to a faxed request for comment.

Work like what Shanghai Cloud Link pitched is likely just the tip of the iceberg. Local governments and police across China have put out similar requests for services to influence overseas social media, but often in vague terms. Occasionally, specifics are revealed. In 2017, for instance, the police in Inner Mongolia purchased software that allowed government trolls to post directly to multiple social media sites, inside and outside of China, according to documents reviewed by The Times.

In another case, a contractor had downloaded hundreds of access credentials for Facebook’s public feed, allowing it to collect data about who commented on which posts and when. Facebook did not immediately comment.

Shanghai Cloud Link’s [winning bid](#) offers a window into how much some of these types of disinformation services can cost.

In many cases, tech contractors seek to sell Chinese authorities the hardware and software outright. In this case, Shanghai Cloud Link’s proposal hinted at a new service-based model, one in which officials pay on a month-by-month basis — a sort of subscription for social media manipulation.

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HEADLINE	12/18 High profile attacks drop from US efforts?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/18/ransomware-persists-even-as-high-profile-attacks-h/
GIST	<p>In the months since President Joe Biden warned Russia’s Vladimir Putin that he needed to crack down on ransomware gangs in his country, there hasn’t been a massive attack like the one last May that resulted in gasoline shortages. But that’s small comfort to Ken Trzaska.</p> <p>Trzaska is president of Lewis & Clark Community College, a small Illinois school that canceled classes for days after a ransomware attack last month that knocked critical computer systems offline.</p> <p>“That first day,” Trzaska said, “I think all of us were probably up 20-plus hours, just moving through the process, trying to get our arms around what happened.”</p>

Even if the United States isn't currently enduring large-scale, front-page ransomware attacks on par with ones earlier this year that targeted the global meat supply or kept millions of Americans from filling their gas tanks, the problem hasn't disappeared. In fact, the attack on Trzaska's college was part of a barrage of lower-profile episodes that have upended the businesses, governments, schools and hospitals that were hit.

The college's ordeal reflects the challenges the Biden administration faces in stamping out the threat - and its uneven progress in doing so since ransomware became an urgent national security problem last spring.

U.S. officials have recaptured some ransom payments, cracked down on abuses of cryptocurrency, and made some arrests. Spy agencies have launched attacks against ransomware groups and the U.S. has pushed federal, state and local governments, as well as private industries, to boost protections.

Yet six months after Biden's admonitions to Putin, it's hard to tell whether hackers have eased up because of U.S. pressure. Smaller-scale attacks continue, with ransomware criminals continuing to operate from Russia with seeming impunity. Administration officials have given conflicting assessments about whether Russia's behavior has changed since last summer. Further complicating matters, ransomware is no longer at the top of the U.S.-Russia agenda, with Washington focused on dissuading Putin from invading Ukraine.

The White House said in a statement that it was determined to "fight all ransomware" through its various tools but that the government's response depends on the severity of the attack.

"There are some that are law enforcement matters and others that are high impact, disruptive ransomware activity posing a direct national security threat that require other measures," the White House statement said.

Ransomware attacks - in which hackers lock up victims' data and demand exorbitant sums to return it - surfaced as a national security emergency for the administration after a May attack on Colonial Pipeline, which supplies nearly half the fuel consumed on the East Coast.

The attack prompted the company to halt operations, causing gas shortages for days, though it resumed service after paying more than \$4 million in ransom. Soon after came an attack on meat processor JBS, which paid an \$11 million ransom.

Biden met with Putin in June in Geneva, where he suggested critical infrastructure sectors should be "off limits" for ransomware and said the U.S. should know in six months to a year "whether we have a cybersecurity arrangement that begins to bring some order."

He reiterated the message in July, days after a major attack on a software company, Kaseya, that affected hundreds of businesses, and said he expected Russia to take action on cybercriminals when the U.S. provides enough information to do so.

Since then, there have been some notable attacks from groups believed to be based in Russia, including against Sinclair Broadcast Group and the National Rifle Association, but none of the same consequence or impact of those from last spring or summer.

One reason may be increased U.S. government scrutiny, or fear of it.

The Biden administration in September sanctioned a Russia-based virtual currency exchange that officials say helped ransomware gangs launder funds. Last month, the Justice Department unsealed charges against a suspected Ukrainian ransomware operator who was arrested in Poland, and has recovered millions of dollars in ransom payments. Gen. Paul Nakasone, the head of U.S. Cyber Command, told The New York Times his agency has begun offensive operations against ransomware groups. The White House says that "whole-of-government" effort will continue.

“I think the ransomware folks, the ones conducting them, are stepping back like, ‘Hey, if we do that, that’s going to get the United States government coming after us offensively,’” Kevin Powers, security strategy adviser for cyber risk firm CyberSaint, said of attacks against critical infrastructure.

U.S. officials, meanwhile, have shared a small number of names of suspected ransomware operators with Russian officials, who have said they have started investigating, according to two people familiar with the matter who were not authorized to speak publicly.

It’s unclear what Russia will do with those names, though Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted the countries have been having a useful dialogue and said “a working mechanism has been established and is actually functioning.”

It’s also hard to measure the impact of individual arrests on the overall threat. Even as the suspected ransomware hacker awaits extradition to the U.S. following his arrest in Poland, another who was indicted by federal prosecutors was later reported by a British tabloid to be living comfortably in Russia and driving luxury cars.

Some are skeptical about attributing any drop-off in high-profile attacks to U.S. efforts.

“It could have just been a fluke,” said Dmitri Alperovitch, former chief technology officer of the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike. He said asking Russia to crack down on large-scale attacks won’t work because “it’s way too granular of a request to calibrate criminal activity they don’t even fully control.”

Top American officials have given conflicting answers about ransomware trends since Biden’s discussions with Putin. Some FBI and Justice Department officials say they’ve seen no change in Russian behavior. National Cyber Director Chris Inglis said there’s been a discernible decrease in attacks but that it was too soon to say why.

It’s hard to quantify the number of attacks given the lack of baseline information and uneven reporting from victims, though the absence of disruptive incidents is an important marker for a White House trying to focus its attention on the most significant national security risks and catastrophic breaches.

Victims of ransomware attacks in the past few months have included hospitals, small businesses, colleges like Howard University - which briefly took many of its systems offline after discovering a September attack - and Virginia’s legislature.

The attack at Lewis & Clark, in Godfrey, Illinois, was discovered two days before Thanksgiving when the school’s IT director detected suspicious activity and proactively took systems offline, said Trzaska, the president.

A ransom note from hackers demanded a payment, though Trzaska declined to reveal the sum or identify the culprits. Though many attacks come from hackers in Russia or Eastern Europe, some originate elsewhere.

With vital education systems affected, including email and the school’s online learning platform, administrators canceled classes for days after the Thanksgiving break and communicated updates to students via social media and through a public alert system.

The college, which had backups on the majority of its servers, resumed operations this month.

The ordeal was daunting enough to inspire Trzaska and another college president who he says endured a similar experience to plan a cybersecurity panel.

“The stock quote from everyone,” Trzaska said, “is not if it’s going to happen but when it’s going to happen.”

HEADLINE	12/17 Capitol rioters fundraising websites
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/17/capitol-attack-insurrectionists-fundraising-defense-money
GIST	<p>Trump supporters and members of far-right extremist groups who took part in the violent insurrection at the US Capitol on 6 January are raising hundreds of thousands of dollars from online crowdfunding sites by portraying themselves as maligned American patriots, martyrs and “political prisoners”.</p> <p>Several of the highest-profile participants in the “stop the steal” insurrection which attempted to disrupt Joe Biden’s certification as US president are raising substantial sums on fundraising sites. They include members of the far-right Proud Boys and many of the 6 January individuals being detained in a Washington DC jail, awaiting trial for allegedly attacking police officers.</p> <p>In their donations appeals they are drastically rewriting history. Their scripts transform 6 January from what it was – a violent attempt to overthrow the democratic results of the 2020 presidential election on behalf of Donald Trump – into the fantasy that it was a peaceful and patriotic protest to uphold voter integrity.</p> <p>“It’s shocking to say, but America now has legitimate political prisoners, en masse,” says the fundraising page titled American Gulag for Jan 6 Political Prisoners which has so far raised \$41,000. The page, created by Jim Hoft, founder of the conspiracy site Gateway Pundit, claims that there are “scores of political prisoners wrongfully imprisoned as a result of the protest on January 6th”.</p> <p>Scott Fairlamb, the first person to be sentenced for assaulting a police officer, describes the insurrection on his fundraising page as a “sea of America loving, American Flag waving patriots who came together from all over our great nation in support of our 45th President Donald Trump”.</p> <p>Fairlamb has so far raised more than \$38,000 towards his goal of \$100,000. He pleaded guilty to the assault and was sentenced to 41 months in prison.</p> <p>The framing of his appeal to potential donors contrasts sharply with what actually happened on the day. Hundreds stormed the Capitol and five people died, including a police officer, with scores more injured.</p> <p>Court documents point to videos that capture Fairlamb climbing scaffolding on the Capitol building and punching and shoving a police officer on the West Front of the complex. Another video catches him wielding a collapsible baton and shouting: “What patriots do? We fuckin’ disarm them and then we storm the fuckin’ Capitol.”</p> <p>Jake Chansley, the self-styled QAnon Shaman whose bearskin headdress and horns became an enduring image of the insurrection, has so far raised more than \$10,000 on his online page, “Free Jake”. In his plea for money, he says he went to Washington on 6 January “answering the call that President Trump put out to his supporters”.</p> <p>He admits he entered the Senate chamber and sat in the seat of vice president Mike Pence, but insists it was only to make a statement “that the people had showed up for work that day”. Chansley pleaded guilty to obstructing an official proceeding and last month was sentenced to 41 months in prison.</p> <p>Richard “Bigo” Barnett, who became instantly infamous after a photo went viral of him inside House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office with his boot up on her desk, has created his own personal fundraising site which purports to be a “legal defense fund”. It is unclear how much he has raised, but donors who give more than \$100 are promised a signed photograph (though not the image for which he is notorious because of copyright issues).</p> <p>In his plea for cash, Barnett likens himself to Japanese Americans interned by the US government during the second world war. He also cites Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet Common Sense which argues for the right of American colonists to stand up against the tyranny of the British government, claiming that he was acting on 6 January in the same spirit – standing up to the “tyranny” that gave Biden the White House.</p>

“Richard believes that his actions were not criminal, but rather a constitutionally protected form of political protest.... He is asking for the support of America’s Patriots, who embrace the kind of America that stands up to the evils of communism and socialism, not bows down to it,” it says.

Barnett, who is out on bond, has been [charged](#) with breaking into the Capitol carrying a deadly stun gun walking stick. In social media posts before the insurrection he described himself as a [“white nationalist”](#). By his [own admission](#), he stole a document from Pelosi’s office and wrote her a note that he left on her desk saying: “Nancy, Bigo was here, you Bitch”.

One of the striking aspects of the 6 January appeal for cash is not only the [large number of fundraisers](#) that have been set up for people accused of participating in the insurrection which stretch into the hundreds, but also the considerable sums of money they have been accruing over the months.

Brandon Straka, a prominent Trump supporter with more than half a million [Twitter followers](#) who has pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct, has [so far raised](#) more than \$178,000 for his “legal defense fund”.

A collective fundraising page for the 40 or so alleged insurrectionists who are being held in pre-trial custody has [so far raised](#) more than \$268,000. Created by a group calling itself The Patriot Freedom Project, it says the money will go to support “1/6ers” and their families who are being “politically persecuted for standing up to what they believe was a fraudulent election”.

[A tally by CNN](#) in September estimated that the total amount raised to support those accused of 6 January crimes may have exceeded \$2m.

Experts who track extremist fundraising online warn that the impressive flow of resources to alleged violent insurrectionists could have long-term consequences by giving succor to anti-democratic movements.

Megan Squire, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, told the Guardian that though the money was put to a variety of uses, from providing bail money and legal fees to paying bills, the scale of the funding was worrying.

“However it is used, there are consequences,” she said. “It definitely keeps them going and keeps them in business, which is not good for any of us.”

Squire said the donation sites also had the effect of spreading involvement in anti-democratic activities by making donors feel involved. “People view donating to events like January 6th as a way of participating from afar,” she said.

“It’s one step up from being a keyboard warrior to being a keyboard warrior with a wallet.”

Accused insurrectionists have been assisted in their fundraising efforts by the proliferation of sites that are willing to host their monetary appeals, even in several cases where the individuals have pleaded guilty or been sentenced to prison terms. The sites include AllFundIt, which was created by a Trump-supporting conservative blogger and which hosts the [Straka fundraiser](#).

[OurFreedomFunding](#) has provided a money-making platform to several of the Proud Boys extremists allegedly involved on 6 January. The site is currently promoting the fundraiser of Zachary Rehl, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the far-right group, which [states](#): “He has fought for all of us, now he needs us to fight for him”.

Rehl’s fund has so far raised more than \$40,000. He is in custody, having been part of a group of Proud Boys leaders who [allegedly began plotting to impede the certification](#) of Biden’s presidential victory by Congress as early as election day on 3 November.

On 7 January, Rehl posted on social media: “I’m proud as fuck of what we accomplished yesterday”.

The cash generating platform of choice for alleged insurrectionists is [GiveSendGo](#), which bills itself as the “#1 Free Christian Crowdfunding Site.” Today it is providing a home to 96 fundraising appeals relating to prosecutions following the Capitol insurrection.

Four of those appeals have each raised more than \$100,000 for their subjects.

Among the 96 fundraisers are appeals for several [military veterans](#) and former law enforcement officers charged with felonies on 6 January. A former army ranger, [Robert Morss](#) allegedly used his military training to [play a leading role](#) in organizing the violent attack on the Capitol.

[Ronald McAbee](#), a then serving sheriff’s deputy from Tennessee, turned up on 6 January wearing his own department’s tactical gear and spiked gloves with metal knuckles. Videos show him [assaulting](#) other police officers. [Julian Khater](#) and [George Tanios](#) both have pages on GiveSendGo. They are [accused](#) of using powerful bear spray to attack Capitol police officer Brian Sidnick who died a day after the insurrection.

A medical examiner [found](#) that Sidnick died of natural causes.

The Guardian reached out to the co-founder of GiveSendGo Jacob Wells, but he did not reply to questions about the site’s hosting of alleged insurrectionists’ fundraising appeals. In a [statement](#) on the website, he calls himself a “committed Christian” who believes that “purpose comes from God”.

On the website, Wells says he does not condone the use of violence for political gain and that “we unequivocally condemn those who threatened the lives of our elected leaders and the police officers who were simply doing their jobs”. He does not explain, however, why his site is [still presenting](#) appeals for cash from individuals like Scott Fairlamb who has pleaded guilty and is imprisoned for assaulting a police officer.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	12/20 SKorea: possible attacks during holidays
SOURCE	http://www.arirang.co.kr/News/News_View.asp?nseq=289815
GIST	<p>The nation's top intel agency warned of possible terrorist attacks during the Christmas holiday season.</p> <p>According to the NIS, terrorist groups may try to demonstrate their strength and power all over the world, so South Korea needs to be aware of such threats.</p> <p>In its report, the agency highlighted that terrorist groups are likely to attack "soft targets" such as the general public.</p> <p>An official said multiple suspects have been detected in South Korea over the last decade, and emphasized the country is no longer free from such threats.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/20 Germany: fears over ISIS prisoners release
SOURCE	https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2021/12/20/fears-over-isis-prisoners-due-for-release-in-germany/
GIST	<p>Jailed ISIS fighters in Europe may have been radicalised further in prison by the time they are released, the head of Germany’s domestic intelligence service has said.</p> <p>Thomas Haldenwang sounded the alarm over extremists due to be released in 2022 after serving sentences for joining the terror group.</p>

As Germany marked five years since an extremist slipped through the security net and killed 12 people at a Christmas market, Mr Haldenwang said the state would have to “examine each individual case” of militants going free.

“We need to know what’s happening in prisons, who is being radicalised further,” said Mr Haldenwang, the head of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

Radicalisation “often does not let up” in prison, he told German media.

Sunday marked the fifth anniversary of the Christmas market attack in Berlin, where Anis Amri drove a lorry into pedestrians in one of Germany’s worst atrocities in modern times. ISIS claimed it was behind the attack.

A final report released in August this year revealed how [security failures let Amri carry out his attack](#) despite him being known to intelligence services.

At a ceremony on Sunday, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier said authorities had a “duty to clarify the mistakes” that led to the attack.

Germany “must correct these mistakes, and it must further investigate when there are new findings,” he said.

Government figures show there are hundreds of people in Germany considered to be dangerous religious extremists.

As of April, there were at least 101 such people in prison in Germany along with 22 other “relevant people”. There were 81 Germans with links to ISIS imprisoned abroad, mostly in Syria.

About 5,300 people are thought to have left Europe to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq since 2012, of whom about half have since left or died, EU estimates show.

Countries including France and Belgium have repatriated children from the Middle East, while Kosovo has about 242 returnees.

In a letter to German Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#), relatives of the Christmas market victims called for new inquiries into possible accomplices of Amri, who was originally from Tunisia and killed in a shootout days after the attack.

The letter called for the “dignified treatment for those affected”, after criticism of how authorities dealt with the grieving relatives.

Mr Steinmeier acknowledged on Sunday there were “failures in the support offered to those left behind”.

The attack “left a deep rift... in all our hearts,” he said. “It was aimed at our way of life in peace, freedom and democracy.”

Mr Scholz said the attack had buried itself deep in Germany’s collective consciousness.

“The state must be watchful and protect its citizens,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Rockets strike Baghdad Green Zone
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/19/two-rockets-strike-baghdads-green-zone-near-us-emb/
GIST	Two rockets hit Baghdad’s Green Zone near the U.S. Embassy on Sunday, Iraqi military officials said.

	<p>No one was injured in the attack. The U.S. Embassy's counter-rocket defense system destroyed one of the rockets, while the other struck near a national monument and damaged several vehicles.</p> <p>Iraqi forces said they've launched an investigation into the attack, which is similar to past assaults launched by Iran-backed Iraqi militias. Those militias have routinely used rockets and drones to target U.S. forces stationed in Iraq and in neighboring Syria.</p> <p>The attacks have become commonplace after a January 2020 U.S. airstrike at the Baghdad International Airport that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani.</p> <p>The Biden administration this month formally ended America's nearly two-decade combat mission in Iraq, though about 2,500 U.S. troops will remain in the country. Those forces will act as trainers and advisers to a global coalition battling the Islamic State terrorist network.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Islamic world unites to aid Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/islamic-world-unites-aid-desperately-poor-afghanistan-81842348
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD -- The economic collapse of Afghanistan, already teetering dangerously on the edge, would have a "horrendous" impact on the region and the world, successive speakers warned Sunday at the start of a one-day summit of foreign ministers from dozens of Islamic countries.</p> <p>The hastily called meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Islamabad brought together dozens of foreign ministers with the special representatives on Afghanistan of major powers, including China, the U.S. and Russia.</p> <p>The gathering also included the U.N. undersecretary general on humanitarian affairs as well as the president of the Islamic Development Bank Muhammad Sulaiman Al Jasser, who offered several concrete financing proposals. He said the IDB can manage trusts that could be used to move money into Afghanistan, jumpstart businesses and help salvage the deeply troubled economy.</p> <p>The dire warnings called for the U.S. and other nations to ease sanctions, including the release upward of \$10 billion in frozen funds following the Taliban takeover of Kabul on Aug. 15.</p> <p>Speakers also called for a quick opening of the country's banking system and collectively, with the United Nations and international banking institutions, assistance to Afghanistan. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan directed his remarks to the U.S., urging Washington to drop preconditions to releasing desperately needed funds and restarting Afghanistan's banking systems.</p> <p>Khan seemed to offer Taliban a pass on the limits on education for girls, urging the world to understand "cultural sensitivities" and saying human rights and women's rights meant different things in different countries. Still other speakers, including the OIC chairman Hussain Ibrahim Taha, emphasized the need for the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.</p> <p>The new Taliban rulers' acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi was in attendance in the grand hall of the Pakistani Parliament, where dozens of foreign ministers from many of the 57-nation OIC had gathered.</p> <p>"This gathering is about the Afghan people," said Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who warned that without immediate aid, Afghanistan was certain to collapse. He said it would have "horrendous consequences," not just in Afghan lives lost to starvation and disease, but would most certainly result in a mass exodus of Afghans. Chaos would spread, he predicted, and allow terrorism and the drug trade to flourish.</p> <p>Martin Griffiths, the U.N. undersecretary for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, warned that Afghanistan will not survive on donations alone. He urged donor countries to show flexibility,</p>

allowing their money to pay salaries of public sector workers and support “basic services such as health, education, electricity, livelihoods, to allow the people of Afghanistan some chance to get through this winter and some encouragement to remain home with their families.”

Beyond that, Griffiths said, “we need constructive engagement with the de facto authorities to clarify what we expect from each other.”

Afghanistan’s teetering economy, he added, requires decisive and compassionate action, or “I fear that this fall will pull down the entire population.”

Griffiths said families simply do not have the cash for everyday purchases like food and fuel as prices soar. The cost of fuel is up by around 40%, and most families spend 80% of their money just to buy food.

He rattled off a number of stark statistics.

“Universal poverty may reach 97% of the population of Afghanistan. That could be the next grim milestone,” he warned. “Within a year, 30% of Afghanistan’s GDP (gross domestic product) could be lost altogether, while male unemployment may double to 29%.”

Next year the U.N. would be asking for \$4.5 billion in aid for Afghanistan - it's single largest humanitarian aid request, he said.

In what appeared to be a message to the Taliban delegation, Qureshi and subsequent speakers, including Taha, emphasized the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.

In an interview with The Associated Press last week, Muttaqi said that Afghanistan’s new rulers were committed to the education of girls and women in the workforce.

Yet four months into Taliban rule, girls are not allowed to attend high school in most provinces and though women have returned to their jobs in much of the health care sector, many female civil servants have been barred from coming to work.

Meanwhile, Qureshi said he wanted to see the summit end with concrete solutions to help Afghanistan and its people. He called for the summit to pledge and channel aid to Afghanistan; increase investment bilaterally or through the OIC in education, health, technical and vocational skills; and to establish a group of experts from the OIC, the United Nations, the Islamic Development Bank and others to help Afghanistan “access legitimate banking services and ease the serious liquidity challenges of the Afghan people.”

He also called for participants to focus on food security, invest in capacity building inside Afghanistan to fight terrorism and the burgeoning drug trafficking.

“Finally, engage with Afghan authorities to help meet the expectations of the international community, in particular regarding political and social inclusivity, respect for human rights, especially the rights of women and girls and combating terrorism,” he said.

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HEADLINE	12/18 After prison, denaturalization, deportation?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-biden-denaturalization-deportation/2021/12/18/e31c958e-5854-11ec-a219-9b4ae96da3b7_story.html
GIST	NEWBURGH, N.Y. — In the summer of 2018, Abdulrahman Farhane and his family were living together again for the first time since “the problem,” their delicate term for the federal terrorism sting that began after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and led to his decade-long imprisonment.

Farhane's six children, now adults, had grown up with the fallout: FBI agents raiding their apartment in Brooklyn. Long road trips to visit their dad in prison. The soothing words of their mother, Malika, when the stain of the case cost them job opportunities and made them pariahs at the mosque.

The family always maintained that the case was unjust, counting Farhane, a Moroccan-born naturalized U.S. citizen, among those they believe were persecuted in the government's post-9/11 roundup of Muslims, which often relied on controversial sting operations. Farhane said he [pleaded guilty](#) to conspiracy to launder money and lying to agents to avoid the risk of an even longer sentence; he said his attorney had warned him that no Muslim would get a fair trial.

After serving 11 years, Farhane won [early release in 2017](#), and by the next summer, the constant fog over the family had begun to lift. They allowed themselves to glimpse a future beyond "the problem."

Then a letter arrived from the Justice Department, delivering a new blow.

"Dear Mr. Farhane," it began. There was a lot of legal jargon, but the most important part was clear: The government plans to "revoke your United States citizenship."

Farhane's former attorney had not told him that a guilty plea could jeopardize his citizenship under laws that allow the government to reverse naturalization in certain cases. For decades, that punishment has been largely reserved for war criminals — naturalized Americans stripped of their citizenship for lying about participating in atrocities in, for example, Nazi Germany or the Balkans.

Farhane, now 67, was released just as the Trump administration was [expanding the practice](#) in overtly political ways, causing alarm among critics who argued that it defied the Supreme Court's view of citizenship as virtually untouchable. In a [2017 bulletin](#) to federal prosecutors, Attorney General Jeff Sessions encouraged stepped-up denaturalization, calling it "a crucial link" in immigration enforcement.

In its first two years, the Trump administration filed nearly three times the average number of civil denaturalization cases opened over the previous eight administrations, according to an Open Society Justice Initiative report, "[Unmaking Americans](#)," published in 2019. The report concluded that "such measures are now applied almost exclusively to marginalized communities," in a campaign targeting people based on their race and religion.

"The denaturalization statutes, already heavily flawed, are far too elastic to safeguard the rights of naturalized Americans in the face of this unprecedented and highly problematic new form of targeting," the report stated.

In February, a month after taking office, President Biden issued an [executive order](#) on immigration that included a directive for agencies to "review policies and practices regarding denaturalization and passport revocation to ensure that these authorities are not used excessively or inappropriately."

Since then, there's been no word on the status of such a review, immigration analysts say. The Justice Department declined to comment.

To the Farhane family, the letter from the government felt like a trapdoor that dropped them back into their old life of anxiety and uncertainty. Only one of the six siblings, 38-year-old Salah, was willing to speak on the record; the others said they fear backlash or just want to move on. Some are delaying marriage and homeownership until it's clear whether all of them can remain in the United States.

Farhane's fate now lies with a federal appeals court that is weighing his argument of ineffective counsel, an urgent effort to save his citizenship and that of his two children who became citizens through him. It could take months or longer for the court to issue a ruling.

If Farhane loses, the family faces another open-ended separation. If he wins, there's a different risk — a vacating of the 2006 guilty plea would mean the government could prosecute him anew, potentially exposing him to more prison time.

For the family, the complex legal battle comes down to one question: Farhane is an American who has served his time, so why is the government still going after him?

"We're constantly trying to escape that period," Salah said, "and they're constantly trying to drag us back in."

Becoming Americans

Farhane's journey from Casablanca to Brooklyn began with serendipity — or destiny, as the family sees it.

Farhane's father died when he was young, forcing him to drop out of high school to support the family. He found solace in martial arts, he said, and eventually became a nationally renowned competitor. The Moroccan government offered him the opportunity to travel abroad for training. When he found long lines at the French Embassy, Farhane said, he decided on a whim to try the U.S. Embassy.

He was granted a visitor's visa in 1989 and returned a couple of more times on brief trips in the early '90s. Then, in 1995, Farhane won the visa lottery, a State Department program that randomly selects applicants for green cards, and moved to the United States for good, with his wife and four young children following soon after. In New York, the couple had two more children. Of the four older siblings, two were naturalized through Farhane and are the ones at risk in the pending case.

Within a year of his arrival in 1995, Farhane bought an Islamic gift shop from an Egyptian friend; he sold books and incense to Muslims who frequented a nearby mosque on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Photos from the family's early days in the United States show them on strolls and picnics near the Brooklyn Bridge, the kids smiling as they posed next to a Bugs Bunny character or showed off school diplomas.

Farhane said his biggest reason for moving to the States was to give his children the educational opportunities he missed out on in Morocco. His wife, Malika, also was eager to figure out her new country, quickly learning English and making friends in her citizenship classes.

"We were happy. How could I have felt unhappy with these people?" Malika said, referring to the Americans who befriended her. "They pushed me and said, 'Don't be scared, you're going to learn.' "

That carefree period ended with the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. Like other U.S. Muslims, the Farhanes said, they barely had time to grieve along with their fellow Americans — fellow New Yorkers — before they felt the backlash.

That same day, Farhane said, an angry man stormed into his store, threatening him. Another time, the parents called the police after a stranger unleashed a dog on one of the girls, whose hijab identified her as Muslim. Malika, who also wears a headscarf, gave birth to her youngest child the February after the attacks; she said the joy was overshadowed by worry that her newborn might be mistreated in the hospital.

"After 9/11, there was no life for us," Malika said of the fear that coursed through Muslim communities. "You walk in the streets but you're not walking, you're wooden. You don't even feel your body."

For a public-speaking class during his freshman year at college, only weeks after the attacks, Salah said, he wrote about how Islam doesn't condone violent actions like those of the hijackers.

"I was nervous — it was my first time speaking in front of the whole class, but I felt I had to do it," Salah said. "I had to let people know: This is where we stand."

In the aftermath, with the nation in mourning and the national security apparatus reeling from deadly intelligence failures, agents fanned out across the country to hunt for Islamist militants and their enablers.

Farhane's shop came under surveillance when an FBI informant — a Yemeni man named Mohamed Alanssi — told authorities that the owner held “radical views of Islam,” according to court documents.

Starting that December, three months after the attacks, Alanssi began secretly recording conversations with Farhane, first inquiring about Islamic charities and gradually building up to asking him to help send money to militants overseas for “wireless communications and advanced weaponry,” prosecutors said. Investigators also found contacts for suspected militants, including one who was linked to bombings in Saudi Arabia and Morocco, in an address book belonging to Farhane, prosecutors said.

In court papers, Farhane denied involvement in plotting terrorism and emphasized his lack of criminal record or ties to any militant group. At his first court appearance, Farhane insisted he was innocent, telling the judge, “I didn’t do anything. This is my country. I love my country.”

Throughout the case, Farhane's lawyers have attacked Alanssi's credibility, portraying the informant as a money-hungry “con man” who led their client into discussions of militancy that he never sought and made him uncomfortable. In 2004, Alanssi made his own headlines when he [set himself on fire](#) in front of the White House, saying that the FBI had failed to pay him for his services.

“Had Alanssi never come into his life, probably you never would have heard of Mr. Farhane,” Farhane's then-attorney Michael Hueston said, according to court transcripts.

Fearing a worse outcome if he went to trial, Farhane said, he accepted the plea agreement on his attorney's advice. In his plea agreement, Farhane “admitted that in November and December 2001 he agreed with others to transfer money for mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan and Chechnya.”

Farhane was sentenced to 13 years in prison and two years of supervised release.

Salah often says his father did the time inside but the family served on the outside. He lost a soccer team spot and, later, a police academy opportunity because of the stigma, he said. His mother grew paranoid and reclusive, trusting no one. When Muslim friends spotted them at the supermarket, Malika said, they abruptly turned their carts and went the other way.

Eventually, the family left Brooklyn and moved to more-affordable Newburgh, in an apartment for now because they're too scared to invest in a house with the case still in flux.

One of the sisters, a promising fencer who saw her dreams thwarted by the ordeal, has distanced herself from the family, trying for a fresh start. As painful as the estrangement is, Salah said, he understands his sister's decision. He admitted that he sometimes thinks of escape, too, picturing a Caribbean island where nobody knows about “the problem” and where he doesn't feel watched around-the-clock.

“He's 38 but his life is like an old man's,” Malika said of her son, with sadness.

Listening to the recounting of the toll on his family, Farhane began to weep. Whatever his conviction, he said, why should his kids pay?

“I'm not a terrorist, but you want to say I'm a terrorist. Okay, kill me!” Farhane said, his shoulders heaving, his head bowed in sobs. “But my son ...”

After all they've endured, Salah said, it's hard to fathom the risk that comes with the pending appeal. Farhane has diabetes and uses a wheelchair because of a spinal injury — Salah said his dad's health isn't up to another round with the government.

“I’m hoping for this nightmare to be over,” Salah said. “Just let us be. Whatever happened, happened. Just let us move on with our life.”

A 'staggering' increase in cases

Throughout the 1930s, '40s and '50s, thousands of people were denaturalized on ideological grounds, often for labor activism, said Amanda Frost, an American University law professor whose new book, [“You Are Not American,”](#) examines the history of denaturalization.

Then, in a 1967 case, Frost said, “the Supreme Court said, ‘You can’t do this.’ ”

“But,” she added, “there was a footnote.”

The court left room for the government to revoke citizenship for [fraud or error in the process](#), including under what Frost refers to as Cold War-era language that allows denaturalization in certain cases related to promoting communism, terrorism or totalitarianism.

In the five decades since, Frost said, Democratic and Republican administrations have used that wiggle room sparingly, typically denaturalizing fewer than a dozen people a year, most of them linked to war crimes and other violent offenses.

“They were the pretty extreme cases, and there were very few of them,” Frost said. “And then came Jeff Sessions under [President Donald] Trump, and he said it clearly: He wanted to use denaturalization as an immigration-control effort.”

The Justice Department division that handles denaturalization acknowledged a “staggering” increase in referrals, according to its budget plan for fiscal 2020.

The Open Society Justice Initiative counted 168 filings in 2017 and 2018. Of those, 11 involved terrorism, as in Farhane’s case. A third of the rest — the largest category of filings — came from a controversial review of thousands of files to identify people who might have become naturalized despite past fraud or criminality. The report said the aggressive approach was accompanied by Trump administration rhetoric disparaging immigrants and Muslims.

It’s almost impossible to pin down where most of those cases stand now and what the current number of pending cases is. The opacity is a main complaint of activists. More than 77 percent of the 168 cases were “either completely blocked online or contained documents that were inaccessible online,” the Justice Initiative report said.

Frost and other denaturalization critics said they haven’t heard of new cases filed since the change of administration, but they remain concerned that Trump-era efforts like the one against Farhane are proceeding. Frost, the Justice Initiative and other critics of the tactic have called for a moratorium.

“I’d like to see the [Biden] administration take denaturalization off the table as a tool for threatening and intimidating and excluding people who are now full members of the community,” Frost said.

In November, federal appellate judges heard Farhane’s argument that the guilty plea should be voided because his previous attorney, Hueston, failed to inform him of the citizenship risks involved or to negotiate a plea without immigration consequences. Reached by phone, Hueston said he had no comment. Farhane is currently represented by attorneys from the [CLEAR clinic](#) at the City University of New York School of Law and the private firm WilmerHale.

Farhane’s legal team argued that it’s absurd that a U.S. citizen would have fewer rights than noncitizens, who by law must be informed of immigration consequences before entering into plea agreements. Government lawyers countered that Hueston was under “no obligation” to advise Farhane on immigration matters.

	<p>Until the ruling comes, the lives of the Farhane family are on pause. Malika’s father died recently, but she couldn’t go to Morocco to be with her family. The siblings are reluctant to make travel plans or apply for new jobs. They’re also anxious about the toll another separation would take on the family — the strain on their father’s health and the burden on their mother, his caretaker.</p> <p>Farhane said he understands the weight of the looming court decision, yet all his discussions of the future are fixed on the idea of remaining at home, in New York. He obtained a GED while in prison, and he dug out a photo that shows him proudly holding the certificate.</p> <p>“I want to go to college now!” he said.</p> <p>“He’s got to win this case first,” Salah said gently. “Or he’s going to college in Morocco.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 ISIS ‘Beatles’ militant faces trial in January
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/18/elsheikh-isis-hostages-trial/
GIST	<p>A British former member of the Islamic State has sought to minimize his role in the captivity of journalists and aid workers, several of whom were killed. But in 2018, court records show he told Department of Defense investigators he was intimately involved in ransom negotiations and privy to details of some hostages’ deaths.</p> <p>El Shafee Elsheikh, who is facing a January trial in Alexandria federal court, is accused of being part of a notorious quartet of ISIS hostage-takers, known as “The Beatles” because of their British accents.</p> <p>The man who beheaded some of those hostages in horrific propaganda videos, Mohammed Emwazi, died in a drone strike in 2015. Conspirator Alexanda Kotey has pleaded guilty in Alexandria federal court. A third is imprisoned in Turkey. Elsheikh’s trial will be the first and possibly last time much of the evidence against the group is aired in public.</p> <p>He is accused of kidnapping and conspiring to murder American journalists and aid workers James Foley, Peter Kassig, Kayla Mueller and Steven Sotloff. The three men were killed in 2014 and their bodies used in propaganda videos by a masked Emwazi, who became known as “Jihadi John.” Mueller died in captivity under unclear circumstances in 2015.</p> <p>Kotey and Elsheikh were captured by the Kurdish-led Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) in early 2018. Over the next two years, they both gave numerous interviews to media outlets in which Elsheikh acknowledged guarding hostages who were later killed and getting information from them for ransom negotiations.</p> <p>In his court case, Elsheikh argued that all the admissions he made in those interviews are false, forced out of him by his captors through torture. On Friday, U.S. District Court Judge T.S. Ellis III rejected Elsheikh’s request to bar prosecutors from using his statements to journalists against him at trial.</p> <p>As prosecutors in recent weeks worked to rebut his claims of torture, they revealed that Elsheikh was more forthcoming with U.S. military intelligence than he was in subsequent media appearances. In the process, the government released some details of those Defense Department interviews, which cannot be used at trial and remain partially classified.</p> <p>According to the documents presented by prosecutors, Elsheikh was interviewed by a Department of Defense team not long after his capture. He told the intelligence interviewers he personally contacted the Norwegian and Japanese consulates to negotiate ransoms for hostages taken from those countries.</p> <p>Emwazi, who spoke in the most infamous ISIS videos, was concerned that his voice was becoming too recognizable and that if he made the calls he would be tracked, Elsheikh told the interviewers. The two Japanese hostages were later beheaded by Emwazi on camera; a photo depicting the body of the Norwegian hostage appeared in an ISIS magazine.</p>

According to the court record, Elsheikh also told the Department of Defense that Emwazi had told him he had buried Foley, an American journalist, near Raqqa, Syria, where the militants engaged in target practice. U.S. investigators searched that area shortly after the interview and failed to find Foley's body.

Elsheikh told the interviewers Emwazi had burned the body of another American journalist, Steven Sotloff, because the ground was too hard for a burial and he was afraid of spending too long outside, according to the court record.

Elsheikh also spoke in detail about the death of British aid worker David Haines, an FBI agent testified in court during a November hearing.

British freelance filmmaker Sean Langan testified that when he interviewed Elsheikh and Kotey in Kurdish custody, he tried unsuccessfully to learn more about the deaths of Foley, Haines and other hostages. He "failed," he said, in part because he got in an emotional argument with Kotey and the SDF barred him from speaking to them again.

Foley was a friend, he explained: "It was too close to home."

Only a brief portion of Langan's interview with Elsheikh has been released; prosecutors plan to use more of it at trial.

Court documents show Kotey told U.S. investigators he was beaten in Kurdish custody. In private recorded conversations after their transfer to U.S. military custody in Iraq, both he and Elsheikh described abuse. But in the same recordings, according to the court record, Kotey told Elsheikh he preferred the SDF prison because they had more space, social contact and recreation. "I would swap places with one of them any day," Kotey said. "Same here," Elsheikh replied.

Three officials in the SDF came to Alexandria court in person to rebut Elsheikh's claims of torture, the first time anyone from the U.S.-allied Kurdish fighting force has appeared in an American court.

The testimony offered a rare, if limited, perspective on the detention centers where thousands of former Islamic State supporters are held.

International human rights monitors have reported overcrowding, and shortages of food, water and medicine at Kurdish-run prisons and camps. The SDF officials, who testified anonymously through interpreters, acknowledged that they were using dilapidated schools as prisons and that influxes of ISIS prisoners strained their resources.

"Our own families and our own communities lack electricity," the man in charge of coordinating with international allies testified. "We are a war zone ... the general population, we're not able to access medications."

But the SDF leaders denied hurting Elsheikh in any way.

"We're not angels; I'm not saying we're perfect," said the head of one prison where Elsheikh was housed. But, he added, "the purpose of our work is to get important information that we can use on the battlefield, and to use force or pressure will not give you the results that you need."

Moreover, he added, the SDF didn't have the capacity to translate English-language media interviews into Arabic or Kurdish and so had no stake in what detainees told Western reporters.

"We have no idea what's going on" in the media interviews, he said.

Defense attorney Nina Ginsberg suggested that he might be reluctant to acknowledge abuse because he could lose his job.

	<p>“My job?” he asked incredulously. “My job is all hardship.”</p> <p>Ginsberg later argued the testimony was “ludicrous,” with SDF officials making the prisons sound like “not a bad place to go and spend a week” when U.S. observers described people sleeping on top of each others and bug infestations.</p> <p>Ellis agreed in court that the SDF officials had reason to understate problems in their prisons, but he said that didn’t “come close” to showing Elsheikh was forced into confessions.</p> <p>Prosecutors said Elsheikh made no complaint to the Red Cross of abuse during his detention; he was given a medical examination when taken into U.S. custody that showed only a “prostration mark” from praying.</p> <p>“There were no signs of abuse or mistreatment whatsoever,” First Assistant U.S. Attorney Raj Parekh said in court. “The victims in this case, those are the individuals that were tortured, that were beaten, that were given threats.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Afghan refugees run into stumbling blocks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/us/politics/afghan-war-refugees.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=US%20Politics
GIST	<p>When he was approved for a special visa to immigrate to the United States, Arian Ali thought his luck was about to change. The Taliban had taken over Afghanistan, but he had a way out.</p> <p>Instead, he remains in limbo.</p> <p>Mr. Ali, 43, qualified for the visa by working with the U.S. government in a series of jobs during the 20-year war and had waited since 2014 for approval. That finally happened in October, more than a month after the Biden administration left Afghanistan in a dramatic evacuation as the Taliban seized control of Kabul, the capital.</p> <p>The visa could be picked up at any American embassy. But the one in Kabul had shut down and, without the visa in hand, he was unable to enter any of the countries he deemed safe enough to visit that had open U.S. consular offices.</p> <p>The day before Thanksgiving, immigration lawyers managed to get Mr. Ali and his family on an American charter flight to a U.S. military base outside Doha, Qatar. Now he is back to waiting — for word on how long he will be there, and when he will get the visa he needs stamped in his passport.</p> <p>“Our life became a joke,” Mr. Ali, who agreed to be identified only by a nickname to protect family still in Afghanistan, said in a text message this week from a refugee camp at Al Udeid Air Base.</p> <p>“Taliban kill and U.S. government too slow and reluctant to help,” he said.</p> <p>More than 74,500 Afghans have been given permission to live in the United States, at least temporarily, in the four months since the return of Taliban rule. Though they are no longer in immediate danger, many have had trouble navigating an immigration system that U.S. officials concede was wholly unprepared to help them.</p> <p>Thousands have stayed in squalid camps. Others have been threatened by security forces as they transit neighboring countries. Even those who have made it to the United States worry about how they will afford housing and food.</p> <p>In interviews, more than a half-dozen Afghans in various stages of immigrating to the United States expressed profound gratitude for the help they received in leaving Afghanistan. But they also shared their frustration — echoed by immigration advocates, members of Congress and even Biden administration</p>

officials — with a process that has provided little clarity on when the United States will deliver on its promise to protect those who risked their lives to support the American government.

“There are lots of people who are trying to find that lucky break that will get them through a door, across the border, on an airplane, get a visa, whatever they need to just get out of the country and try to process themselves into some kind of new reality,” said James B. Cunningham, who served as ambassador to Afghanistan from 2012 to 2014.

“Unfortunately, that’s going to continue for a long time,” he said.

Biden administration officials say they are trying to ease the passage. But they have struggled with what Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken described last month as a situation that “is in so many ways a complicated story that I’m not sure the American people fully understood.”

Additionally, Congress and the White House have failed to resolve whether to give permanent legal status to tens of thousands of Afghans who were evacuated to the United States. That means they could, in theory, be deported in as little as two years.

“The U.S. military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan may have ended in August,” said Sunil Varghese, the policy director for the International Refugee Assistance Project, “but U.S. government’s obligation did not.”

Terrified in Tajikistan

With the Taliban back in power, a 36-year-old man who had also worked with the U.S. government knew he had to get his family out of Afghanistan.

J.F., who agreed to be identified only by his initials for protection, spent years helping the U.S. Treasury Department prosecute money laundering and terrorism financing cases, including against the Taliban. His mother worked for the now-defunct Ministry of Women’s Affairs, counseling victims of domestic violence.

He and his family hid in Kabul for weeks in October, then fled to neighboring Iran. From there, and with a legal entry visa, they flew to Dushanbe, the Tajik capital. With a prominent Afghan diaspora on the outskirts of the city, it seemed like the safest place to be while he applied for what is known as “humanitarian parole” to the United States — given that the process must be completed in a country that has a functioning U.S. embassy. Parole status allows Afghan refugees to live in the United States for a fixed period, in most cases two years.

But six days after they arrived in Dushanbe in early November, security guards knocked on the door of the family’s apartment and took their passports. When he went to the agents’ office the next day, they refused to return the documents and said the family would be sent back to Afghanistan.

Were that to happen, Mr. F. said, the Taliban “will not let us live.”

Requests for help from a group of Americans who worked with Mr. F. in Kabul have bounced between Congress, the State Department, Treasury and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services without resolution — or even much of an explanation.

“Treasury’s hands are pretty much tied,” a Treasury official said in a Nov. 5 email on the matter that was shared with The New York Times.

“Our office will be happy to assist the family once U.S.C.I.S. approves their parole request,” the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe responded in a Nov. 11 email.

In an email dated Nov. 12, an aide to Senator Todd Young, Republican of Indiana, also suggested that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services needed to move first but noted that processing the requests would “likely take several months.”

Only about 135 of the 28,000 applications from Afghans seeking humanitarian parole have been approved since July 1, according to the agency, which usually receives fewer than 2,000 applications from around the world each year.

A spokeswoman at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services would not verify Mr. F’s case, citing privacy concerns, but said in a statement that the agency was prepared to welcome more Afghans over the coming months.

Mr. F. managed to retrieve his family’s passports but is living in Dushanbe on a short-term visa that expires every month, with no guarantee that it will be renewed.

If it is not, he and his family will be deported.

“I didn’t expect to get it easily,” he said of approval to come to the United States, “but it’s too difficult.”

One of his former colleagues, John Kimbler, the chief executive of California-based Paradigm Applications, is mystified by the web of bureaucracy.

“He’s safer now than he was before, but it seems like there should be a way to move him on to secure that safety,” Mr. Kimbler said.

Dwindling Patience in Qatar

Mursal Nazar considered herself fortunate. She was evacuated to the camp at Al Udeid Air Base on a U.S. military flight on Aug. 25 — one day before an [Islamic State suicide bomber killed](#) scores of Afghans and 13 American troops at the same gate where she had been waiting to be let into the Kabul airport.

But the three-hour flight turned into a 11-hour ordeal as the hundreds of passengers, packed tightly in the sweltering cabin, underwent security and safety checks after they landed.

At the time, the camp was so unprepared for the more than 60,000 Afghans who would transit through Qatar that even the Pentagon reported [“some terrible sanitation conditions”](#) there.

“We didn’t have proper toilets to use,” said Ms. Nazar, 31. “We didn’t have places to go and take a shower and places for women, who need privacy, to go and change their clothes. They put men and women sleeping under the same tent — different kinds of people, from different cultures and different beliefs. That was a problem for us.”

After a 10-day wait, Ms. Nazar and her husband left for the United States.

Officials said conditions had vastly improved at Al Udeid, which continues to house thousands of Afghans on their way to the United States.

During the evacuation, a dozen overseas transit hubs, or “lily pads,” housed thousands of Afghans. But concerns about a long-term strain on Pentagon resources and readiness have led to the closure of all but three of the sites: Al Udeid, one in Kosovo and a vast field of tents known as Humanitarian City in the United Arab Emirates. Officials said there were at least 2,900 Afghans — the number frequently changes — at the three bases waiting to come to the United States.

The host governments have also raised concerns about allowing in thousands of people who American officials have said may not have been fully vetted before they were flown out of Afghanistan.

Qatar recently banned Afghans who don't have passports or other government-approved credentials, though there may be exceptions, Deputy Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, the country's top diplomat, [said in Washington last month](#).

For security reasons, "it's very important to make sure that the right people are evacuated," he said.

Mr. Ali is among at least 28,000 Afghans who have been identified as qualifying for the [special immigrant visa](#) because of their work for the U.S. government. The State Department says it has issued 8,200 of the visas since last January, and hopes to bring out at least 1,000 more from Afghanistan each month through next September, although that goal may be especially difficult to reach in the winter and with Kabul's airport in disarray.

But a yearslong delay in processing the visas has enraged military veterans and others who served in Afghanistan, and become a rare source of unity within a Congress that has been divided to the point of paralysis on other aspects of immigration.

"The United States pledged to support those who served our mission in Afghanistan," Senators Jim Risch of Idaho, James M. Inhofe of Oklahoma and Rob Portman of Ohio, all Republicans, wrote in an [Oct. 21 letter](#) to demand an investigation into the delays. "Failing to do so would lead allies and adversaries alike to call into question our reliability and credibility as a partner in future conflicts."

Mr. Blinken has noted that the State Department, which issues the visas after they have been vetted by the Homeland Security Department, inherited a [backlog of 17,000 applications](#) when President Biden took office in January. Consular officers were processing about 100 special immigrant visas each week last winter but about 1,000 as Mr. Biden's deadline for ending the war approached in August.

Mr. Ali was eligible for a visa through his work since 2003 for the U.S. Agency for International Development, the United Nations, advocacy groups and the fledgling Afghan government.

"I'm proud of the work I did with the United States," he said. "But I don't understand how the U.S. government could abandon its allies."

Stressed in the United States

Ms. Nazar applied for a special immigrant visa last year as the Taliban seized territory across Afghanistan and the U.S. military prepared to leave. It had not been approved by the time she was evacuated to the camp in Qatar in August, however, and she entered the United States on humanitarian parole that required her to live on a National Guard base in Indiana as she waited for refugee resettlement officials to take her case.

She arrived at Camp Atterbury, south of Indianapolis, before dawn on Sept. 6, and was struck by the expanse of green fields and fresh air. "I was relieved that finally I was somewhere I can be relaxed," she said.

It did not last long. The mess halls ran out of food in the early days. Base officials struggled to track the Afghans; as recently as mid-November, a military public affairs officer insisted that Ms. Nazar had already left Camp Atterbury even though she had not.

Worst of all was the nagging anxiety of when they might move them off base and into homes.

"When we asked the same question, like, 'How long is it going to take? On what basis are you going let these families to be resettled from here?' they say, 'We don't have any answer for your questions — you just have to wait for your turn, and whenever it comes, we will call you,'" Ms. Nazar said last month.

Her turn finally came Thanksgiving week, when she moved into a temporary apartment in Bayonne, N.J. "Things are going well," she said recently, although she is waiting for work authorization and other documents.

Resettlement agencies have helped place around 38,000 Afghans in American communities since August.

Tens of thousands of Afghans are still waiting on seven military bases in the United States. But a refugee camp at Fort Lee, Va., was shuttered on Nov. 17, and officials said one in Quantico, Va., would likely be next.

“The most important thing we can do is put people on the path to self-sufficiency as quickly as we can,” Jack Markell, the former governor of Delaware and the coordinator of Operation Allies Welcome, the White House resettlement process for evacuated Afghans, said in an interview last month.

As many as 4,000 Afghans are moved from the camps and resettled each week, and “this is an effort that will continue,” Mr. Markell said.

He acknowledged Afghans’ frustration, and said officials have tried to answer more of their questions in recent weeks. “If we were in their shoes, we’d want the same thing,” Mr. Markell said. “We’d all want to know, as quickly as possible, where we’re going to be building our new lives.”

Refugee agencies have been overwhelmed with caring for Afghans families who are moved into American communities. A family of 10, including a newborn baby, had no money and no benefits when they were settled outside Washington D.C. and depended on grocery deliveries from the Muslim Association of Virginia. In Houston, some Afghans have been placed in crime-ridden neighborhoods and are living in apartments with dilapidated toilets or black mold in bathrooms, and are salvaging supplies from rubbish heaps or borrowing from neighbors.

“There are pregnant women who have slept on hard floors with no blankets, no mattress,” said Shekeba Morrad, an Afghan-American community organizer in Washington D.C. and Northern Virginia, who works with a nationwide group trying to monitor the situation of the newly arrived Afghans.

Hamid Wahidy, 34, and his family made it to the camp at Quantico via a route that first took them to Qatar, Germany and Dulles International Airport outside Washington. They stayed at the camp for 40 days before moving into a small Airbnb in San Diego. The first month there was a blur of bureaucratic shuffling to receive his Social Security card, which he needed to open a bank account, obtain a driver’s license, apply for a job and enroll his kids in school.

A few weeks later, he moved into a larger home. It cost him \$3,400 — for one month’s rent and a security deposit — of the \$5,000 the family received from a resettlement agency. He did not immediately receive food stamps and other benefits that he had expected under a spending bill that Congress passed in September that included \$6.3 billion in expanded assistance to the arriving Afghans.

The legislation also did not include an expedited process for legal residency for Mr. Wahidy and other Afghans. Without it, immigration advocates say, they could eventually be deported.

Senator Amy Klobuchar, Democrat of Minnesota, noted that the Afghan refugees had already undergone background checks and other security screening, and suggested they could fill job vacancies created by the pandemic.

“This is not only the right thing to do — it will enrich our communities and strengthen our economy,” said Ms. Klobuchar, who is among those pushing for the Afghans to be given “a clear path to remain here as lawful permanent residents.”

Mr. Wahidy described his family’s journey out of Kabul in August — including crawling through a fetid canal to catch the attention of an American soldier standing guard at the airport — as “very difficult.”

In San Diego, he has relied on donations. He is still trying to accept that his life will never be what it was in Afghanistan before the Taliban took over — “a good life in our own country,” he said wistfully.

	<p>“We had a job there, we could handle our family, our normal life,” Mr. Wahidy said, exhaling deeply. “But here, it is 180 degrees change.”</p> <p>“It’s not clear, our future,” he said. “What will happen to us, I don’t know.”</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Symbol of US strength; now in dire times
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/world/asia/afghanistan-marja-economy-taliban.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=World%20News
GIST	<p>MARJA, Afghanistan — Haji Rozi Khan stood outside the gate of the bullet-pocked building that housed the Marja district’s government offices, staring through the slotted steel door into the compound. Taliban guards stared back. They were not who he was looking for.</p> <p>Mr. Khan had trekked to Marja’s district center in Helmand Province from his village several miles away by motorbike, kicking up powdered dust as he navigated the unpaved roads, long damaged by the war. He was searching for a figure who had been even more elusive since the Taliban took power in August: an aid worker.</p> <p>“We have nothing to eat,” he said in an interview last month.</p> <p>Once, Marja was the site of one of the biggest battles of the two-decade war, part of the United States’ counterinsurgency campaign to weaken the Taliban and build up a local government. But today, the grid-like patch of mud-walled hamlets and canals looks much as it did at the outset of the invasion in 2001: barely navigable roads, understaffed and damaged schools and clinics and withered crops, crippled by one of the worst droughts in decades.</p> <p>As Afghanistan sinks deeper into a humanitarian crisis, Marja’s residents are still caught in the war’s aftershocks. Amid a crashing economy and ruined harvests, in a place where most people barely live above the poverty line, many are just now realizing how dependent they were on foreign aid, their lifeline for 20 years, which was cut off practically overnight. They’re growing increasingly desperate for help, a frustration that has morphed into anger that the international community has seemingly abandoned them.</p> <p>Marja residents are also coming to terms with a new Taliban government that may have brought peace, but with dwindling cash and the squelching of foreign aid has been able to deliver on little else.</p> <p>“The government isn’t able to help themselves and we’re not able to help ourselves,” Mr. Khan said as a small group of farmers gathered outside the district center to voice similar complaints to the local government.</p> <p>It is a tragic but almost inevitable turn for a district in southern Afghanistan that has since become emblematic of the multi-trillion-dollar nation-building effort by the West that crumbled even before the Americans fully withdrew from the country in August. Many in Marja were happy to see the foreign occupation end and the Taliban take power, because it brought stability to the region after years of fighting that took countless civilian lives and wrought widespread destruction.</p> <p>Mr. Khan had lived for nearly 30 years at the edge of Marja, where he grew wheat, cotton and corn until his crop was battered last year by the drought. That same year, his nephew was killed by a roadside bomb.</p> <p>This year’s turmoil has been deepened by the arrival of roughly 20 displaced families from central Afghanistan. They were hungry and homeless, he said, so he gave them what little food he could spare before making his way to the district center in hopes of finding someone else who could help.</p> <p>“We are so tired,” Mr. Khan said, his blue shalwar kameez flapping in the morning breeze.</p>

In recent weeks, the United States and the European Union have pledged to provide \$1.29 billion more in aid to Afghanistan. The World Bank's board moved in late November to free up \$280 million in frozen donor funding, but U.S. sanctions against the Taliban continue to make it extremely difficult for aid organizations to get money into the country.

Aside from the sanctions, the Taliban government's inability to provide for its people also stems from its inexperience in governance, which was clearly illustrated in a visit to the district office in Marja.

Inside the squat government building that was refurbished by the Americans a decade ago and nearly destroyed by fighting in the decade since, sat Mullah Abdul Salam Hussaini, 37, Marja's district governor. The newly appointed local leader had spent the better part of the last 20 years — essentially his entire adulthood — trying to kill U.S. and NATO forces as a Taliban fighter.

Now he found himself governing a district of around 80,000 people mired in crisis, with little in the way of funds, infrastructure or public-service experience to support his constituents.

People lined up at the compound gates with a litany of complaints and requests: Do something about the displaced refugees; build a new health clinic; help farmers whose crops were destroyed; find more teachers for what may be the only remaining school in Marja.

"Whatever people ask, I am asking that, too, because we are not in a situation to do it ourselves," Mr. Hussaini said quietly, surrounded by Talibs who looked far more comfortable behind a rifle than a desk. "We need the help of foreigners because they did it before and we're asking them to do it again."

Inside the governor's dimly lit office, walls and window sill adorned with Kalashnikov rifles and other weapons captured from the previous government, sat a representative from a local aid group who had come to survey the district and its food needs for the World Food Program. The organization is still distributing basic food staples, but the rising demand has far exceeded their supplies.

For years, the insurgent group controlled pockets of Afghanistan and fueled a shadow economy by leeching off the previous government's foreign-filled coffers through taxes on everyone in their territory, including truck drivers and aid workers. But those sorts of activities cannot make up for the loss of outside help.

"The Taliban don't seem to have had a sense of how dependent the economy was on foreign support, which they benefited from as did everyone else," said Kate Clark, the co-director of Afghanistan Analysts Network. "Even under the areas under Taliban control they weren't funding the schools and the clinics."

Marja, a district long reliant on growing poppy for its own illicit economy that the Taliban also taxed, was built by the United States in the late 1950s and 1960s as an agricultural project that diverted water from the Helmand River into a series of distinct grids.

In 2010, during the height of President Barack Obama's troop surge, thousands of Western and Afghan troops secured the network of canals and fields in a major military offensive and then made promises of roads, schools and a functioning local government. Considered the last Taliban stronghold in central Helmand, Marja was a strategically important district in the eyes of military planners, who decided a victory there would be crucial to Mr. Obama's new counterinsurgency strategy.

The Koru Chareh bazaar, a cluster of shoddy low-slung, steel-door shops, was where some of the first American troops arrived in 2010. "They came at night," recalled Abdul Kabir, a young shopkeeper who was 9 when the first helicopters landed nearby.

As a boy, he watched as the Marines in desert tan uniforms walked by, saying nothing to him.

But this November, the only visible signs of the Americans' occupation was a "Trump 2020 Keep America Great" flag draped from a shopkeeper's peanut stand and a Confederate battle flag hanging from

a shed nearby. A paved road that bisects Marja from north to south is arguably the most prominent American piece of infrastructure in the district, built as part of the more than \$4 billion in stabilization funds that the United States poured into the country.

“It’s good the fighting is over,” Mr. Kabir said, standing next to his money exchange stand, where he focused on changing afghanis into Pakistani rupees. Few people ambled by. He had lived in Marja his whole life, an arc that followed the entire U.S. occupation.

Mr. Kabir was one of several residents who praised the security situation but lamented the economic downturn. “There is no money and everything is expensive,” he added.

With fluctuating border restrictions, higher import costs and a cash shortage, basic products in the bazaar, such as cooking oil, are three times as expensive as they once were.

To the vendors, who have distinct memories of fighting outside their homes, and explosions and gunshots that killed their friends, the economic crunch and the United States’ unwillingness to recognize the Taliban feel like punishments against them, not the new government.

Ali Mohammed, 27, who runs a chicken stand at the main intersection of the bazaar, has carried the weight of the war for years. He watched as a friend was gunned down by the Americans in a field just a few hundred yards from where he now sells his underfed birds. To him, his country’s situation was simply a new phase of the conflict.

“The foreigners say they are not here anymore,” he said. “But they didn’t finish the war against us.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 Hidden archive: civilian casualty files
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/us/airstrikes-civilian-casualty-files-pentagon.html
GIST	<p>In the years since American boots on the ground gave way to a war of airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, the U.S. military has made a central promise: that precision bombs and drones would kill enemies while minimizing the risks to civilians.</p> <p>Recent investigations by The New York Times have undercut that promise. In September, The Times reported that a drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan, which American officials said had destroyed a vehicle laden with bombs, had instead killed 10 members of a family. Last month, The Times reported that dozens of civilians had been killed in a 2019 bombing in Syria that the military had hidden from public view.</p> <p>Now, a Times investigation has found that these were not outliers, but rather the regular casualties of a transformed way of war gone wrong.</p> <p>Drawing on more than 1,300 documents from a hidden Pentagon archive, the investigation reveals that, since 2014, the American air war has been plagued by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and imprecise targeting and the deaths of thousands of civilians, many of them children.</p> <p>In addition to reviewing the military’s own assessments of reports of civilian casualties — obtained through Freedom of Information requests and lawsuits against the Defense Department and U.S. Central Command — The Times visited nearly 100 casualty sites in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan and interviewed scores of surviving residents and current and former American officials.</p> <p>Here are key takeaways from Part 1 of the investigation. Part 2 will be published in the coming days.</p> <p>Civilian deaths have been drastically undercounted</p> <p>According to the military’s count, 1,417 civilians have died in airstrikes in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria; since 2018 in Afghanistan, U.S. air operations have killed at least 188 civilians. But The Times found that the civilian death toll was significantly higher. Discrepancies arose in case after case — none more stark than a 2016 bombing in the Syrian hamlet of Tokhar.</p>

American Special Operations forces hit what they believed were three ISIS “staging areas,” confident they were killing scores of ISIS fighters. A military investigation concluded that seven to 24 civilians “intermixed with the fighters” might have died. But, The Times found, the targeted buildings were houses where families had sought refuge. More than 120 civilians were killed.

In 1,311 reports, one ‘possible violation’

The Pentagon has also failed to uphold pledges of transparency and accountability.

[Until now](#), only a handful of the assessments have been made public. None included a finding of wrongdoing or disciplinary action. Only one cited a “possible violation” of the rules of engagement — a breach in the procedure for identifying a target. Fewer than a dozen condolence payments were made, even though injured survivors often required costly medical care. The records show little effort by the military to identify patterns of failure or lessons learned.

In many instances, the command that had approved a strike was responsible for examining it, often using incorrect or incomplete evidence. In only one case did investigators visit the site of a strike. In only two did they interview survivors or witnesses.

Taken together, the 5,400 pages of records point to an institutional acceptance of civilian casualties. In the logic of the military, a strike was justifiable as long as the expected risk to civilians had been properly weighed against the military gain, and it had been approved up the chain of command.

Over 50,000 airstrikes, most not planned in advance

America’s new way of war took shape after the 2009 surge of U.S. forces into Afghanistan. By the end of 2014, President Barack Obama declared America’s ground war essentially done, shifting the military’s mission to mostly air support and advice for Afghan forces battling the Taliban. At roughly the same time, he authorized a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS targets and in support of allied forces in Iraq and Syria.

At an ever-quicken pace over the next five years, and as the administration of Mr. Obama gave way to that of Donald J. Trump, American forces executed more than 50,000 airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

When the wars intensified, the authority to approve strikes was pushed further down the chain of command, even as an overwhelming majority of strikes were carried out in the heat of war, and not planned far in advance.

Biases and blind spots created danger

The records suggest that civilian deaths were often the result of “confirmation bias,” or the tendency to find and interpret information in a way that confirms pre-existing beliefs. People rushing to a bombing site were assumed to be ISIS fighters, not civilian rescuers. Men on motorcycles, thought to be moving “information,” displaying the “signature” of an imminent attack, were just men on motorcycles.

Cultural blind spots also left innocent civilians vulnerable to attack. The military judged, for example, that there was “no civilian presence” in a house where families were napping during the days of the Ramadan fast or sheltering from the heat or intense fighting.

Breakdowns in technology and surveillance

For all their promise of pinpoint accuracy, at times the American weapons simply missed. In 2016, the military reported that it had killed Neil Prakash, a notorious Australian ISIS recruiter, in a strike on a house in East Mosul. Four civilians died in the strike, according to the Pentagon. Months later, Mr. Prakash was arrested crossing from Syria into Turkey.

Poor or insufficient surveillance footage often contributed to deadly targeting failures. Afterward, it also hamstrung efforts to examine strikes. Of the 1,311 reports examined by The Times, the military had

deemed 216 allegations “credible.” Reports of civilian casualties were often dismissed because video showed no bodies in the rubble, yet the footage was often too brief to make a reliable determination.

Sometimes, only seconds’ worth of footage was taken before a strike, hardly enough for investigators to assess civilians’ presence. In some other cases, there was no footage at all for review, which became the basis for rejecting the allegation. That was often because of “equipment error,” because no aircraft had “observed or recorded the strike,” or because the unit could not or would not find the footage or had not preserved it as required.

A failure to account for secondary explosions

A target like a weapons cache or power station came with the potential for secondary explosions, which often reached far beyond the expected blast radius. These accounted for nearly a third of all civilian casualties acknowledged by the military and half of all civilian deaths and injuries at the sites visited by The Times.

A June 2015 strike on a car-bomb factory in Hawija, Iraq, is among the deadliest examples. In plans for the nighttime attack, the nearest “collateral concern” was assessed to be a “shed.” But apartment buildings ringed the site, and dozens of displaced families, unable to afford rent, had also been squatting in abandoned buildings close by.

According to the military investigation, as many as 70 civilians were killed that night.

In response to questions from The Times, Capt. Bill Urban, the spokesman for the U.S. Central Command, said that “even with the best technology in the world, mistakes do happen, whether based on incomplete information or misinterpretation of the information available. And we try to learn from those mistakes.” He added: “We work diligently to avoid such harm. We investigate each credible instance. And we regret each loss of innocent life.”

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Read the Pentagon records

The Times is making public [hundreds of the documents](#).

HEADLINE	12/18 Pentagon records: patterns of failure
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/18/us/airstrikes-pentagon-records-civilian-deaths.html
GIST	<p>Shortly before 3 a.m. on July 19, 2016, American Special Operations forces bombed what they believed were three ISIS “staging areas” on the outskirts of Tokhar, a riverside hamlet in northern Syria. They reported 85 fighters killed. In fact, they hit houses far from the front line, where farmers, their families and other local people sought nighttime sanctuary from bombing and gunfire. More than 120 villagers were killed.</p> <p>In early 2017 in Iraq, an American war plane struck a dark-colored vehicle, believed to be a car bomb, stopped at an intersection in the Wadi Hajar neighborhood of West Mosul. Actually, the car had been bearing not a bomb but a man named Majid Mahmoud Ahmed, his wife and their two children, who were fleeing the fighting nearby. They and three other civilians were killed.</p> <p>In November 2015, after observing a man dragging an “unknown heavy object” into an ISIS “defensive fighting position,” American forces struck a building in Ramadi, Iraq. A military review found that the object was actually “a person of small stature” — a child — who died in the strike.</p> <p>None of these deadly failures resulted in a finding of wrongdoing.</p> <p>These cases are drawn from a hidden Pentagon archive of the American air war in the Middle East since 2014.</p> <p>The trove of documents — the military’s own confidential assessments of more than 1,300 reports of civilian casualties, obtained by The New York Times — lays bare how the air war has been marked by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and often imprecise targeting, and the deaths of thousands of civilians,</p>

many of them children, a sharp contrast to the American government's image of war waged by all-seeing drones and precision bombs.

The documents show, too, that despite the Pentagon's highly codified system for examining civilian casualties, pledges of transparency and accountability have given way to opacity and impunity. In only a handful of cases were the assessments made public. Not a single record provided includes a finding of wrongdoing or disciplinary action. Fewer than a dozen condolence payments were made, even though many survivors were left with disabilities requiring expensive medical care. Documented efforts to identify root causes or lessons learned are rare.

The air campaign represents a fundamental transformation of warfare that took shape in the final years of the Obama administration, amid the deepening unpopularity of the forever wars that had claimed more than 6,000 American service members. The United States traded many of its boots on the ground for an arsenal of aircraft directed by controllers sitting at computers, often thousands of miles away. President Barack Obama called it "the most precise air campaign in history."

This was the promise: America's "extraordinary technology" would allow the military to kill the right people while taking the greatest possible care not to harm the wrong ones.

The ISIS caliphate ultimately crumbled under the weight of American bombing. For years, American air power was crucial to the beleaguered Afghan government's survival. And as U.S. combat deaths dwindled, the faraway wars, and their civilian tolls, receded from most Americans' sights and minds.

On occasion, stunning revelations have pierced the silence. A Times investigation found that [a Kabul drone strike in August](#), which American officials said had destroyed a vehicle laden with bombs, had instead killed 10 members of one Afghan family. The Times recently reported that dozens of civilians had been killed in a [2019 bombing in Syria that the military had hidden from public view](#). That strike was ordered by a top-secret strike cell called Talon Anvil that, according to people who worked with it, frequently sidestepped procedures meant to protect civilians. Talon Anvil executed a significant portion of the air war against ISIS in Syria.

The Pentagon regularly publishes bare-bones summaries of civilian casualty incidents, and it recently ordered a new, high-level investigation of the 2019 Syria airstrike. But in the rare cases where failings are publicly acknowledged, they tend to be characterized as unfortunate, unavoidable and uncommon.

In response to questions from The Times, Capt. Bill Urban, the spokesman for the U.S. Central Command, said that "even with the best technology in the world, mistakes do happen, whether based on incomplete information or misinterpretation of the information available. And we try to learn from those mistakes." He added: "We work diligently to avoid such harm. We investigate each credible instance. And we regret each loss of innocent life."

He described minimizing the risk of harm to civilians as "a strategic necessity as well as a legal and moral imperative," driven by the way these casualties are used "to feed the ideological hatred espoused by our enemies in the post 9/11 conflicts and supercharge the recruiting of the next generation of violent extremists."

Yet what the hidden documents show is that civilians have become the regular collateral casualties of a way of war gone badly wrong.

To understand how this happened, The Times did what military officials admit they have not done: analyzed the casualty assessments in aggregate to discern patterns of failed intelligence, decision-making and execution. It also visited more than 100 casualty sites and interviewed scores of surviving residents and current and former American officials. In the coming days, the second part of this series will trace those journeys through the war zones of Iraq and Syria.

Taken together, the reporting offers the most sweeping, and also the most granular, portrait of how the air war was prosecuted and investigated — and of its civilian toll.

There is no way to determine that full toll, but one thing is certain: It is far higher than the Pentagon has acknowledged. According to the military's count, 1,417 civilians have died in airstrikes in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria; since 2018 in Afghanistan, U.S. air operations have killed at least 188 civilians. But The Times's analysis of the documents found that many allegations of civilian casualties had been summarily discounted, with scant evaluation. And the on-the-ground reporting — involving a sampling of cases dismissed, cases deemed “credible” and, in Afghanistan, cases not included in the trove of Pentagon documents — found hundreds of deaths uncounted.

The war of precision did not promise that civilians would not die. But before a strike is approved, the military must undertake elaborate protocols to estimate and avoid civilian harm; any expected civilian casualties must be proportional to the military advantage gained. And America's precision bombs are indeed precise: They hit their targets with near-unerring accuracy.

The documents, along with The Times's ground reporting, illustrate the many, often disastrous ways the military's predictions of the peril to civilians turn out to be wrong. Their lessons rarely learned, these breakdowns of intelligence and surveillance occur again and again.

Repeatedly the documents point to the psychological phenomenon of “confirmation bias” — the tendency to search for and interpret information in a way that confirms a pre-existing belief. People streaming toward a fresh bombing site were assumed to be ISIS fighters, not civilian rescuers.

[Men on motorcycles](#) moving “in formation,” displaying the “signature” of an imminent attack, were just men on motorcycles.

Often, the danger to civilians is lost in the cultural gulf separating American soldiers and the local populace. “No civilian presence” was detected when, in fact, families were sleeping through the days of the Ramadan fast, sheltering inside against the midsummer swelter or gathering in a single house for protection when the fighting intensified.

In many cases, civilians were visible in surveillance footage, but their presence was either not observed by analysts or was not noted in the communications before a strike. In chat logs accompanying some assessments, soldiers can sound as if they are playing video games, in one case expressing glee over getting to fire in an area ostensibly “poppin” with ISIS fighters — without spotting the children in their midst.

The military spokesman, Captain Urban, pointed out that, “In many combat situations, where targeteers face credible threat streams and do not have the luxury of time, the fog of war can lead to decisions that tragically result in civilian harm.”

Indeed, the Pentagon records detail how [in Mosul in 2016, three civilians were killed](#) when a bomb aimed at one car instead struck three — in part because the military official approving the strike had decided to save more-precise weapons for other, imminent strikes. Yet The Times's analysis of the documents and ground reporting showed that civilians were frequently killed in airstrikes planned well in advance.

Military officials often speak of their “over the horizon” long-range surveillance capabilities. But the documents repeatedly identify deficiencies in the quality and quantity of the video footage guiding intelligence.

Sometimes, only seconds' worth of footage was taken before a strike, hardly enough to assess civilians' presence. Often video shot from the air does not show people inside buildings, people under foliage, people under the aluminum or tarpaulin covers known as “quamaria” that shield cars and market stalls from the sun.

In more than half of the cases deemed credible by the military, one or two civilians were killed entering the target area after a weapon was fired. Officials often describe these as awful but inescapable accidents. But while many might have been averted through additional precautions — widening the surveillance camera's field of view or deploying additional drones — the phenomenon continued unabated, amid the intense pace of battle and a shortage of surveillance aircraft.

And sometimes, for reasons redacted in the documents, the weapons simply miss. In April 2016 the military reported that it had killed a notorious Australian ISIS recruiter, Neil Prakash, in [a strike on a house in East Mosul](#). Months later, very much alive, he was arrested crossing from Syria into Turkey. Four civilians died in the strike, according to the Pentagon.

Yet despite this unrelenting toll, the military's system for examining civilian casualties rarely functions as a tool to teach or assess blame.

Not only do the records contain no findings of wrongdoing or disciplinary action, but in only one instance is there is a "possible violation" of the rules of engagement. That stemmed from a breach in the procedure for identifying a target. Full investigations were recommended in fewer than 12 percent of the credible cases.

In many cases, the command that approved a strike was responsible for examining it, too. And those examinations were often based on incorrect or incomplete evidence. Military officials interviewed survivors or witnesses in only two cases. Civilian-casualty reports were regularly dismissed because video showed no bodies in the rubble, yet the footage was often too brief to make a true determination.

In his response to The Times, Captain Urban said, "An honest mistake, on a strike taken with the best available information and in keeping with mission requirements that results in civilian casualties, is not, in and of itself, a cause for disciplinary actions as set forth in the law of armed conflict."

American officials had an opportunity to mine the documents for root causes and patterns of error in 2018, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the National Defense University undertook a study of civilian deaths. But one of the researchers who sought to analyze the documents in aggregate told The Times that almost all of his findings had been cut from the report. Another high-level study of the air campaign has never been made public.

In the end, what emerges from the more than 5,400 pages of records is an institutional acceptance of an inevitable collateral toll. In the logic of the military, a strike, however deadly to civilians, is acceptable as long as it has been properly decided and approved — the proportionality of military gain to civilian danger weighed — in accordance with the chain of command.

Lawrence Lewis, the former Pentagon and State Department adviser whose analysis for the 2018 study was quashed, said in an interview that the military's technological prowess, and the highly bureaucratized system for assessing how it is employed, may actually serve an unspoken purpose: to create greater legal and moral space for greater risk.

"Now we can take strikes in city streets, because we have Hellfire missiles, and we have fancy things with blades," he said. "We develop all these capabilities, but we don't use them to buy down risk for civilians. We just use them so we can make attacks that maybe we couldn't do before."

The Promise of Precision

The new way of war came to fruition in the wake of the 2009 surge of American troops into Afghanistan, which brought some stability but never turned the war around.

By the end of 2014, with NATO's mission also ending, President Obama declared America's ground war essentially done. Henceforth, the United States would primarily provide air support and advice for Afghan forces battling the Taliban.

At roughly the same time, as Islamic State fighters swept through Mosul and massacred thousands of Yazidi Kurds at Mount Sinjar, Mr. Obama authorized a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS targets and in support of allied forces in Iraq and Syria.

The weaponry was hardly untested. This high-tech arsenal, increasingly sophisticated, had been critical to success in the 1991 Persian Gulf war, in NATO's 1999 campaign in the Balkans, and more recently in Yemen and Somalia. By the time of the wars in the Middle East, the MQ-9 Reaper drone, outfitted with laser-guided Hellfire missiles, had become the surveillance and attack vehicle of choice.

At an ever-quicken pace over the next five years, and as the administration of Mr. Obama gave way to that of Donald J. Trump, American forces would execute more than 50,000 airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, in accordance with a rigorous approval process that prized being "discriminate," "proportional" and in compliance with the law of armed conflict. Not only would this be the most precise air campaign ever; it would be the most transparent.

The only official accounting of that promise is the hidden Pentagon documents.

They were obtained through Freedom of Information requests beginning in March 2017 and lawsuits filed against the Defense Department and U.S. Central Command. To date, The Times has received 1,311 out of at least 2,866 reports — known as credibility assessments — examining airstrikes in Iraq and Syria between September 2014 and January 2018. Requests for records from Afghanistan are the subject of a new lawsuit.

Each report is the fruit of a review process that begins when a potential civilian-casualty incident is identified by the military or, more frequently, alleged by an outside source — a nongovernmental organization, a news outlet or social media.

Assessment experts classify allegations into two categories. A case is "credible" if it is deemed "more likely than not" that the airstrike caused civilian casualties. In the reports examined by The Times, 216 cases were deemed credible. "Noncredible" cases fail to meet that standard — often because there is no record of a strike at the place and time in question, or because the available evidence is considered insufficiently specific or simply weak.

Until now, fewer than 20 of these assessments dating to late 2014 have been made public.

To assess the military's assessments, between late 2016 and this past June, The Times visited the sites of 60 incidents deemed credible in Iraq and Syria, as well as three dozen others deemed noncredible or not yet assessed.

(It also visited dozens of strike sites in Afghanistan.) In 35 credible cases, it was possible to locate the precise impact area and find survivors and witnesses on the ground. Then the reporting included touring wreckage; collecting photo and video evidence; and verifying casualties through death certificates, government IDs and hospital records.

Frequently the reporting closely matched basic information from the documents. But the detailed accounts that ultimately emerged from the rubble ground were often in stark contrast to what had been assessed from the air.

'Play Time?'

this area is poppin

It was Jan. 13, 2017, and the battle for East Mosul would soon reach the neighborhood of al-Faisaliya. Iraqi forces were 120 meters away; farther back, an American ground team was helping coordinate air support.

In Erbil and in Doha, Qatar, a ground controller and aircrew members typed out messages, helping fulfill the array of combat directives and rules of the strike process:

adm in kp 9 has his rifle leaning against wall

An adult male leaned against a rooftop wall, his rifle beside him, then was seen firing south before two men joined him.

play time?

The ground controller asked how much longer the crew had in the target area. The response was redacted. A man was seen running into a building, then out.

bldg slant **redacted**

The “slant” — the number of men, women and children observed — was typed into the chat. (Four men, one woman and three children in a building would be “bldg slant 4/1/3.”) This slant is redacted.

The coordinates were entered for what was now assessed as a building used by ISIS.

cleared hot

Clearance to attack was granted, and the weapon — the exact kind is redacted — fired.

Splash

Five seconds to impact.

Two “squirters” — people fleeing a bomb site — were observed: one running from the building, the other heading back inside. The drone followed the men, firing on one but overshooting. It fired again, then turned to four others.

The action continued — a series of attacks on men darting through the area, until the drone returned to the building and struck again.

bldg was completely dropped

Toward the end, men were observed getting into a van.

looks like children as well

JAN. 13, 2017 — MOSUL, IRAQ

Messages between the ground controller and aircrew as they targeted a building assessed as harboring ISIS fighters. Inside were three families. Eight civilians were killed.

The war against ISIS heralded the dawn of “strike cells” — remote operations centers from which most airstrikes were directed and controlled. These war rooms synergized the myriad players — pilots, sensor operators, intelligence experts, ground forces, weaponeering specialists, civilian-casualty-mitigation analysts, lawyers, even weather officers.

Strike cells boasted at times that, with their video feeds and surveillance aircraft, they could understand what was happening on the battlefield as well as if they were there themselves.

As the war intensified and ground commanders won greater authority to call in strikes, the cells expanded, with a small number of Americans embedded with allies on the battlefield. The cells were seen as so successful that they made their way to Afghanistan, too. And as the Trump administration sought to pressure the Taliban into a deal, decision-making authority for airstrikes was often pushed further down the chain of command.

The cells conducted “dynamic strikes” — identified and executed within minutes or hours in the flow of war, accounting for an overwhelming majority of the air campaign. “Deliberate” strikes, which were preplanned — extensively vetted, often filmed over weeks or months and analyzed by several working groups — decreased over time.

In both scenarios, the targeting process essentially boiled down to two questions: Could the presumed enemy target be positively identified? And would any harm to civilians be proportional, in line with the law of armed conflict — or would it exceed the “expected military advantage gained”?

For positive identification, the officer designated with strike approval needed “reasonable certainty” that the target performed a function for the adversary. That could be relatively straightforward, as when the target was a fighter firing directly on friendly forces. But a more ambiguous target, like a suspected ISIS headquarters, might require further surveillance.

To determine proportionality, analysts evaluated whether the target was used exclusively by the enemy or might also be used by civilians, then assessed civilians’ “pattern of life.” Ultimately, they would calculate how many civilians were likely to be killed or wounded.

For deliberate strikes, this generally entailed an exhaustive “collateral damage estimate,” a computer calculation of the expected civilian casualty count, based on a mix of factors: the pattern of life, the population density, the specific weapon being used, the kind of structure being targeted — a concrete building, an aluminum shed, a mud hut. The officer approving the strike would weigh that estimate with other factors, such as the potential for secondary blasts from explosive materials nearby.

For dynamic strikes, the process could be vastly compressed. Especially if there was a threat to friendly forces or some other urgency, strike cells were more likely to rely on an impromptu assessment of a video feed.

Either way, based on that calculation, the military was required to take “feasible precautions” to mitigate civilian harm. The greater the likelihood of someone being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the more precautions taken — say, by deploying more-precise weaponry to limit the blast radius or by attacking when the fewest civilians were predicted to be present.

The military does not provide a precise definition of what is proportional. Essentially, the expected civilian toll was proportional if the officer making that determination reasonably believed it to be so, and if it did not exceed a “noncombatant cutoff value.” Otherwise, officials say, the target would be discarded.

The final official step was a legal review. But efforts to protect civilians could continue until moments before a weapon was fired. From the cockpit, pilots could select how a weapon detonated — upon impact or with a delayed fuse. Or they could call an “abort,” if, for example, a civilian was spotted walking into the target area.

Under the right circumstances, this process could result in a strike so precise that it would destroy the section of a house filled with enemy fighters and leave the rest of the building intact.

As Iraqi forces approached Qusay Saad’s home in East Mosul on Jan. 12, 2017, ISIS forced his family to move to an area still under its control. They found refuge in his brother’s abandoned house in al-Faisaliya.

Through a night of gunfire and explosions, Mr. Saad and his wife, Zuhour, comforted their three children and prayed that Iraqi forces would reach them. Then ISIS ordered them to move again, into an abandoned school next door with two other families. That was the building observed in the chat on Jan. 13, 2017.

[The first airstrike hit](#) as the Saad family sat down to breakfast. Mr. Saad recalls concrete blocks pressing down on his head, and his wife screaming. A man from one of the other families lifted away the blocks, and he quickly wrested his 14-month-old daughter, Aisha, from the rubble and handed her to his wife.

The second strike came just as he turned to free his 7-year-old son, Muhammad.

“The strike was unbelievable,” he said. “An entire three-story house was just crushed.”

Three members of another family escaped. Mr. Saad could not find his wife, their 4-year-old son, Abdulrahman, or Aisha. But Muhammad was alive, his thigh split open. Bleeding from the head, Mr. Saad picked up the boy and fled.

It would be two months before he could recover the bodies. The Iraqi government offered no help. So the family paid to excavate the site. Mr. Saad watched as his wife and two youngest children were lifted out. Aisha’s head was missing, but her little body was in her mother’s arms.

They were buried not far from their home, which Mr. Saad has kept as it was when they all lived there. Sometimes, his brother said, he spends whole nights at the graveyard.

Last month, The Times told him of the findings of the military’s assessment. It offers this account: The target was a building assessed as harboring four ISIS fighters. A review of the imagery revealed that after the first strike, which because of a “weapon malfunction” only partly collapsed the building, four adults and four children could be seen moving in its center. The building was hit again and fully collapsed. Later, three people emerged. The strike team did not report any civilians in the vicinity, and because of the drone’s angle, a view of the eight people in the building after the first strike “was obscured.”

The allegation was deemed credible, with eight civilians killed, but no further investigation was ordered. Eight “enemies” were also killed, the document said.

JAN. 13, 2017 — MOSUL, IRAQ

The **redacted** FMV clearly shows eight unarmed individuals some of whom are assessed to be children moving in the rubble after the first munition detonated on the target building.

When told of the Army’s findings, Mr. Saad could not understand how a military with such a wealth of information could have failed to see them — or how the pursuit of fighters he never saw could justify leveling a building full of families. If the Americans would show him the video, he said, he would show them Mosul.

“They have to come here and see with their own eyes,” he said, adding, “What happened wasn’t liberation. It was the destruction of humanity.”

How Deadly Failures Happen

Last May, the Pentagon’s inspector general [completed a classified report](#) evaluating the policies for ensuring that “only valid military targets are struck,” and that “damage to property and loss of civilian life is mitigated to the maximum extent possible.”

A redacted version, echoing similar studies by other agencies in recent years, declares the targeting process to be sound.

The Pentagon’s own assessments tell a far richer story.

The documents often do not articulate precise causes, and in many cases, several factors coalesced into a deadly failure. But The Times’s analysis of the 216 cases deemed credible, together with its reporting on the ground, reveals several distinct patterns of failure.

Misidentifying Civilians

Positive identification of the enemy is one of the pillars of the targeting process, yet ordinary citizens were routinely mistaken for combatants.

In a dissenting footnote to the 2018 Joint Chiefs' study, Mr. Lewis and a colleague cited research showing that misidentification was one of the two leading causes of civilian casualties in American military operations. With few troops on the ground, they wrote, "it is reasonable to expect a systematic undercounting of misidentifications in U.S. military reports."

Indeed, according to the Pentagon records, misidentification was involved in only 4 percent of cases. At the casualty sites visited by The Times, misidentification was a major factor in 17 percent of incidents, but accounted for nearly a third of civilian deaths and injuries.

At times, the error involved quicksilver intelligence of an imminent threat. In The Times's ground sample, though, misidentification occurred just as frequently in strikes planned far in advance — as in [a January 2017 strike](#) on an ISIS "foreign fighter headquarters" in East Mosul that killed 16 people in what turned out to be three civilian homes. Three ISIS buildings down the street were untouched.

Yet in case after case, the misidentification appears to be less a matter of confusion than of confirmation bias.

That was what happened on Nov. 20, 2016, after a Special Operations task force received a report of an ISIS explosives factory in a Syrian village north of Raqqa. In a walled compound, operators spotted "white bags," assessed to be ammonium nitrate. Two trucks with a dozen men departed, stopped at various ISIS checkpoints, drove to a building "associated with previous ISIS activity," then returned to the compound. The first strike targeted one truck, which caused "secondary explosions." On the evidence of those blasts and the "white bags," operators received approval to strike three buildings. After impact, two "squirters" fled the westernmost building. That building and another were struck again.

The findings of [the military's review](#), begun after online reports that a strike in the same area had killed nine civilians and injured more than a dozen, contradicted nearly all of the original intelligence.

NOV. 20, 2016 — RAQQA, SYRIA

A military review showed that a target believed to be an ISIS explosives factory was actually a cotton gin. Nine civilians were killed. Further investigation was not recommended.

Examining scans of the compound, analysts detected no ammonium nitrate. The presumed secondary explosions were actually reflections from a nearby building, and one of the "squirters" was a child. Finally, a six-month time lapse of imagery showed that the compound was "more likely a cotton gin than a factory" for explosives. Two civilians were killed, the report said. (The task force continued to call the gin a legitimate target, citing a news report that ISIS controlled three-quarters of Syria's cotton production.)

Several months later, in Iraq, American forces received intelligence about a suspected car bomb — a dark-colored, heavily armored vehicle moving through the Wadi Hajar neighborhood of West Mosul.

Scanning a surveillance feed, an air-support coordinator quickly homed in on a possible match: a green vehicle whose windows appeared to be covered over. He did not see any signs of reinforced armor, but positively identified both the green car and a closely trailing white vehicle as car bombs.

Both vehicles traveled away from the front line and stopped at an intersection where several people were gathered on a covered section of sidewalk. The driver of the first car got out and joined the group. The target authority approved the strike.

The targeted vehicle "sustained a direct hit," according to [the military assessment](#). The group on the sidewalk "sustained weapons effects."

But the review of the footage found no evidence that the vehicle was a car bomb. There was no telltale secondary explosion. Nor was the car heavily armored. And though the people on the sidewalk were visible in the footage, they were never mentioned in the pre-strike chat.

FEB. 25, 2017 — MOSUL, IRAQ

Based on a review of all available information, the CIVCAS allegation is credible. Full motion video (FMV) shows that five individuals near the target vehicle were killed or injured by the strike, and there is no information to indicate that those individuals had been or could be positively identified as combatants.

The full picture, which the targeting team involved in the strike failed to see, emerged when The Times visited Wadi Hajar earlier this year.

Ordered by ISIS to leave the neighborhood, Majid Mahmoud Ahmed, his wife and two children had piled into their blue — not green — Opel Astra station wagon. Following close behind in a white car were his brother, Firas, and his family. At an intersection where other fleeing residents had gathered, Mr. Ahmed spotted his friend Muhammad Jamaal Muhammad waving and got out to say hello. As another neighbor approached, the airstrike hit.

“I remember there was a big explosion, and I fainted,” recalled Abdul Hakeem Abdullah Hamash Al Aqidi, an elderly man who had been standing by his door at the intersection. He lost an eye and had to have a plate implanted in his injured left leg. His son’s left leg had to be amputated.

In all, seven local people — including the four members of the Ahmed family — were killed. Mr. Mohamed, who had waved to Mr. Ahmed, cannot banish from his mind the image of his friend’s wife, Hiba Bashir, burned into the seat, still holding her infant son in her lap.

The military spokesman, Captain Urban, acknowledged that “confirmation bias is a real concern,” citing the Kabul airstrike in August that killed the 10 members of a family. “There is more work to do on this,” he said.

Failing to Detect Civilians

If the military often mistook civilians for enemy fighters, frequently it simply failed to see or understand that they were there. That was a factor in a fifth of the cases in the Pentagon documents, and a slightly smaller fraction of the casualties. However, it accounted for 37 percent of credible cases, and nearly three-fourths of the total civilian deaths and injuries at the sites visited by The Times.

Captain Urban said the targeting process had been vastly complicated by enemies who “plan, resource and base themselves in and among local populace.”

“They do not present themselves in large formations,” he added, “do not fight coalition forces with conventional tactics, and use geography and terrain in ways not conducive in every way to easy targeting solutions. Moreover, they often and deliberately use civilians as human shields, and they do not subscribe to anything remotely like the law of armed conflict to which we subscribe.”

Even so, the documents show that frequently, instead of extended surveillance, analysts relied on brief “collateral scans” — as little as 11 seconds long — in determining that civilians were not in the area. The footage was often limited by shortages of surveillance drones, particularly during the battles to retake Mosul and Raqqa.

In a number of cases, targets that had been placed on “no-strike lists” because attacking them would violate laws of war — a school, a bakery, a civilian hospital — were removed after the military mistakenly judged that they were now used exclusively by the enemy.

In Mosul in February 2017, a hospital was taken off the list after the military concluded that civilians had left the area, and that the building was being used only as an ISIS headquarters and propaganda center. The week before the strike, [according to the report](#), analysts had examined still images of children “interacting” with the hospital but had determined that striking at night would “alleviate collateral concerns.” Four civilians were killed and six injured.

For the military's analysts, studying the "pattern of life" is a crucial step in predicting collateral damage. But to examine the documents and interview local people is to understand how often unseen civilians might have been seen, or their presence at least suspected, had the military had a more intimate knowledge of the war-torn fabric of everyday life.

In some documents, as evidence of no civilian presence, military officials state that people would leave their homes at the sound of approaching aircraft. The reality is starkly different: Neighbors would huddle together, seeking communal sanctuary in a house or group of houses, invisible to surveillance drones.

Many of the deadliest airstrikes happened this way. Among them was the [strike at the Syrian hamlet of Tokhar](#).

In July 2016, a Special Operations task force identified a large group of ISIS fighters two kilometers from where U.S.-backed forces were fighting ISIS. They observed the fighters traveling in pickups known as "bongo trucks" to three "staging areas" where no civilians were present. The fighters, they concluded, were assembling for a counterattack.

Shortly before 3 a.m., they bombed the three staging sites and five vehicles, confident of killing 85 ISIS fighters.

JULY 19, 2016 — TOKHAR, SYRIA

A military investigation concluded that as many as 24 civilians were "intermixed" with the combatants reported killed at three ISIS "staging areas." The Times found that the targets were houses, and that more than 120 civilians were killed.

Almost immediately, reports of a vast civilian death toll surfaced online. The task force conducted a full investigation and determined that between seven and 24 civilians "intermixed with the fighters" might have been killed.

The Times visited Tokhar in December 2018. Surviving villagers gave this account:

That night, as they had every night for a month, some 200 villagers had trekked to the outer edge of the hamlet and taken shelter in four homes at the farthest remove from the quickening battle.

There was no evidence, they said, that ISIS had been near any of the four houses. In fact, residents said drones had been flying overhead for weeks, giving them solace that coalition forces knew they were there.

The Times documented the names of civilians killed in each of the four houses, corroborating details with open-source information, local journalists and others on the ground, and determined that more than 120 people died. There were few young men left to pull bodies from the rubble. It took nearly two weeks, and still some were never found. If the full death toll were acknowledged, Tokhar would be the largest civilian casualty incident the United States has admitted to in the air war against ISIS.

Saif Saleh, 8 years old at the time, awoke that early morning to the collapsing walls, his arm trapped under debris. His parents used up every favor to collect \$6,000 for surgery to graft skin from his leg.

Asked what he would like to tell the American military, Saif's father said, "We want to say that you should be sure the area is empty or that there are no civilians before you bomb."

The military investigation found that there was no evidence of negligence or wrongdoing; that the "policies, procedures and practices" were "sufficient for continued operations"; and that "no further action" was necessary. No condolence payments were authorized.

Overlooking Flawed Intelligence

Often, civilians were killed in strikes executed in the face of incomplete, outdated or ambiguous intelligence. Several such factors came together in a [strike that killed at least 10 civilians in Tabqa, Syria](#), in March 2017.

As American-backed forces prepared to recapture the city, west of Raqqa, military officials approved strikes on a group of ISIS targets: two headquarters, a police station and a weapons factory. Each strike went as planned, according to initial assessments. Then came reports of civilian casualties.

The military review found that the intelligence for both headquarters was based on single reports from months before. (The targets had been identified earlier, but for strategic advantage, commanders had decided to wait until Syrian Democratic Forces were pushing into Tabqa.) The intelligence package on the first building warned that there was “insufficient” evidence to corroborate the judgment, relied on to remove the building from a restricted-targeting list, that it was used solely by ISIS; the report said simply that an ISIS emir had frequented the site.

Similarly, the review found that the intelligence did not support the view that the second headquarters was used exclusively by ISIS. What’s more, even though both headquarters were in densely populated areas with residential structures nearby, there was insufficient footage to assess the presence of civilians — one minute of video of the first target and less than two of the second.

The review also raised serious questions about the quality of intelligence for the two other targets.

Flawed Video

Sometimes, the problem was less the quantity of video than the quality

Analysts at the military’s Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar saw this clearly when they reviewed 17 minutes of grainy footage that preceded [a Nov. 13, 2015, strike](#) on an ISIS “defensive fighting position” in Ramadi. Using the center’s 62-inch high-definition TV, they concluded that what had been identified as an “unknown heavy object” being dragged into a building was actually “a person of small stature,” “consistent with how a child would appear standing next to an adult.”

Often the overhead surveillance camera missed people simply sitting or standing under something, doing the most quotidian things.

[June 15, 2016](#): An ISIS fighter on a motorcycle turned onto a secondary road near Mosul University. It was Ramadan; the shops and stalls were teeming with people. Among the five civilians also killed and four wounded in the strike:

Abdul Wahab Adnan Qassim, killed by shrapnel, had been standing in the tree-filled courtyard of his house.

Zanoun Ezzedine Mahmoud, killed by the blast, had been standing at a fruit stand covered by a blue tarp blocking the sun. The stand’s owner, Ilyas Ali Abd Ali, lost his right leg.

A father and daughter, killed by glass and shrapnel, had been sitting in a car nearby.

Nashwan Abdul Majeed Abdul Hakeem Al Radwani, killed by shrapnel, had been standing under the awning of the popular Hammurabi Ice Cream Shop.

Walking Into Danger

More than half of the cases the military deemed credible involved someone entering the target frame in the moments between a weapon’s firing and impact, as in [a March 2017 strike in Mosul](#) when shrapnel killed a man pushing a cart down a road near an ISIS mortar tube.

These deaths, which account for 10 percent of acknowledged civilian casualties, are often framed as unavoidable accidents. In the Mosul strike that killed the man with the cart, operators had already twice aborted weapons releases because civilians had entered the frame — demonstrating concerted efforts to avert danger. Yet the systematic nature of the problem suggests the military could be doing more.

Indeed, [the review of a February 2017 strike](#) on a “high value individual” at a funeral in Mosul that injured two civilians includes some recommendations. While noting that the civilians’ presence “could not be predicted to reasonable certainty,” it adds that an additional surveillance aircraft could have provided a

more encompassing view. (Because of the target's importance, two aircraft were used to zoom in, rather than out, on the wider scene.) Yet again surveillance drones were in short supply.

Secondary Explosions

In the late spring of 2015, as ISIS continued to prove resilient in carrying out attacks and retaining territory, American targeteers and weapons specialists prepared [a nighttime airstrike on a car-bomb factory](#) in the industrial district of Hawija, north of Baghdad. Occupied apartment houses ringed the area. But the nearest "collateral concern" was assessed to be a "shed."

Not long before, dozens of displaced families, unable to afford rent, had also begun squatting in the abandoned houses scattered through the industrial zone. Among them were Khadijah Yaseen and her family, who had fled the fighting in their hometown, Yathrib.

The night of June 2 was particularly hot, so the family slept outside. They woke to screaming and the sound of the jets.

"There was fire everywhere," Ms. Yaseen recalled when The Times met her at a displaced persons camp in October 2016. Most of those killed were from squatter families like hers. "You couldn't count them. There were so many people that died."

As many as 70, a military investigation found. Ms. Yaseen lost three grandchildren: 13-year-old Muhammad, 12-year-old Ahmed and a 3-year-old girl, Zahra.

JUNE 2, 2015 — HAWIJA, IRAQ

Plans for a coalition airstrike on an ISIS car-bomb factory failed to account for the potential for secondary explosions. As many as 70 people were killed, the military investigation found.

Hawija is among the deadliest examples of the failure to predict the collateral consequences of striking weapons caches or other targets with the potential for secondary explosions. Such explosions often reached far beyond the expected blast radius; they accounted for nearly a third of all civilian casualties acknowledged by the military and half of all civilian deaths and injuries at the sites visited by The Times.

Although the American military planned the Hawija strike, the bombs were dropped by the air force of the Netherlands. There, the case became a cause célèbre after it emerged that the defense minister had worked to suppress the findings of the military investigation.

In the report of the investigation, targeteers and weapons experts describe the ultimately disastrous calculations taken to win approval for the strike. They worked and reworked the target, carefully calculating what kinds of munitions to use until their model concluded — despite the fact that they would be striking a car-bomb factory with apartment buildings nearby — that there would be no civilian deaths. (The Dutch military would only carry out strikes with an expected civilian-casualty rate of zero.)

The document describes a secondary explosion that produced a "visible shock wave" extending more than 750 feet from the target.

"That is massive, to be able to see a shock wave like that on a video," said a former high-level official involved in the air campaign against ISIS, speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation. The only comparable explosion he'd seen, he said, was the 2020 blast that devastated the port of Beirut.

Among the sites visited by The Times, at least half of the strikes with secondary explosions involved targets — like a power station or a factory for improvised explosive devices — that the military could have predicted would produce such blasts.

However, at other times it was unaware of both a weapons cache and a civilian presence. That was the case in the largest civilian casualty incident the military has admitted in the war, [the March 17, 2017, airstrike on two ISIS snipers](#) in the Mosul al-Jadida neighborhood that killed at least 103 civilians.

Failures of Accountability

On Jan. 6, 2017, Rafi Al Iraqi woke to the sound of a bomb close by. Another hit next door. Moments later, his own house was struck. He could hear his oldest son, Hamoody, screaming in the wreckage. “I just gave him to some people to take him to the hospital,” Mr. Al Iraqi recalled. “Then I went back in to find my other children.”

What happened next was captured on video taken by ISIS’ media agency, which often visited blast sites for propaganda.

Rescuers emerged holding limp bodies. Mr. Al Iraqi’s daughter, Nour, was alive. “I took her with my own hands to the hospital,” he recalled this past June, in his most recent interview with The Times. “But by then, she had died.” A nearby house for ISIS fighters was untouched.

Soon, via the ISIS video and news reports, word spread online that three families had been targeted in the Zerai neighborhood near Mosul’s Grand Mosque. In all, 16 civilians were killed, including three of Mr. Al Iraqi’s children and his mother-in-law. Hamoody’s leg was lacerated.

The military began a civilian-casualty assessment, which found that there had been a single strike in Zerai that day — on a house assessed to be used exclusively as an ISIS “foreign fighter headquarters” and “artillery staging location.” The strike had been preplanned, with no expected civilian casualties.

JAN. 6, 2017 — MOSUL, IRAQ

The military deemed this case noncredible, finding that the target was an ISIS site and that no civilians had been harmed. But interviews with survivors, as well as video footage and photos, showed that 16 civilians were killed.

The post-strike footage showed no civilians killed or injured. The post-strike chat did not indicate the presence of civilians, though it did mention a wounded man — judged to be an ISIS fighter — being helped from the ruins.

The footage was 1 minute and 22 seconds long. The allegation was deemed noncredible. Officially, 16 people had not died that day in Zerai. (The Pentagon finally acknowledged the casualties in September 2020, after years of follow-up by The Times.)

JAN. 6, 2017 — MOSUL, IRAQ

Pre-strike assessment of the target concluded that there were no civilians in the target facility, and there is no evidence on the face of the strike indicating that civilians were killed or injured as a consequence of the strike.

Except for the rare instances of revelation and subsequent outcry, the Pentagon’s brief published reports on the minority of cases it finds credible are the only public acknowledgment of the air war’s civilian toll.

The Times’s reporting in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan points to the broader truth.

In addition to the finding that many allegations of civilian casualties were erroneously dismissed, The Times discovered that even when civilian deaths were acknowledged, they were often significantly undercounted.

Roughly 37 percent of the allegations deemed credible stemmed from prior ground investigations by journalists or nongovernmental organizations; in those cases, the acknowledged death tolls roughly tracked outside reporting. But in the other cases, The Times’s own reporting found that the civilian toll was nearly double that acknowledged by the military. (That did not include ISIS fighters’ wives and children, whose information was difficult to verify.)

The documents identify children killed or injured in 27 percent of cases; in The Times's ground reporting it was 62 percent. In 40 percent of the sites visited, survivors had been left with significant disabilities, which were not tracked by the military.

Beyond the casualty count, the structure and execution of the assessments do not encourage the regular examination of immediate lessons or deeper trends.

The records obtained by The Times, some significantly redacted, range from short first-impression reports to more formal credibility assessments. The reports generally contain a narrative drawn from the strike's "target package" — including intelligence about the target, the civilian-casualty estimate, actions to mitigate civilian harm, video footage and chat logs tracking each step of the process.

Not only was there no record of disciplinary action, or full investigations in roughly 9 of every 10 cases, but only a quarter included any further review, recommendations or lessons learned. Even the architecture of the forms makes it difficult to analyze causes in aggregate; they do not have specific boxes for specific factors involved in a fatal error.

There are a few places to record proximate causes or lessons learned, but those fields are mostly empty or redacted.

Records are often incomplete, missing attachments or were only partially entered into shared databases.

In many cases, the unit that executed a strike also ended up investigating it; their assessments often included minimal information. For example, a Special Operations unit's rationale for rejecting allegations that a December 2016 airstrike near Raqqa had killed as many as nine civilians consisted of a single paragraph stating that it had reviewed its strikes in the area and found "no evidence of possible civilian casualties." There was no further information or detail from the footage.

The Times found that such omissions, as well as redactions and missing documents, were often associated with Talon Anvil, the Special Operations unit that carried out the recently revealed airstrike that killed dozens of civilians in Syria in 2019.

The Video Evidence

Of the 1,311 assessments from the Pentagon, in only one did investigators visit the site of a strike. In only two did they interview witnesses or survivors.

Captain Urban, the military spokesman, said that in hostile territory, investigators might be unable to visit a blast site and interview "personnel on the ground."

Instead, often the resounding piece of evidence studied was video recorded in the wake of a strike. Yet just as poor or insufficient footage frequently contributed to deadly targeting failures, so did it hamstring efforts to examine them.

Often, the footage was only seconds or minutes long, in many cases too brief to see rescuers carrying survivors from a collapsed building. (Frequently, rescuers would wait before approaching a bombed area, for fear of being misidentified and provoking a second strike, known in the military as a "double tap.") Often, images were obscured by the smoke of the blast.

In an interview — speaking anonymously because of a nondisclosure agreement — an analyst who captures strike imagery said superior officers would often "tell the cameras to look somewhere else" because "they knew if they'd just hit a bad target."

And at times, there was simply no footage for review, which became the basis for rejecting the allegation. That was often because of "equipment error," because no aircraft had "observed or recorded the strike," or because the unit could not or would not find the footage or had not preserved it as required.

In a number of cases, compelling allegations were dismissed because the claim's details did not precisely match the imagery.

For example, [when Airwars](#) — the leading source of civilian casualty allegations referred to the military — reported that [a strike in East Mosul in April 2015](#) had killed dozens of civilian rescuers, the allegation was rejected because of “discrepancies in eyewitness accounts.” Despite accurately testifying that three bombs had struck an electric substation, a witness said the third had come a quarter-hour after the second and had not exploded; the document described that as “inconsistent” with the military's imagery and strike report. (The allegation was later deemed credible after The Times visited the site and told the military that at least 18 civilians had been killed and more than a dozen wounded.)

Even when allegations were deemed credible, the military often undercounted the toll because victims, unseen by the overhead camera before the strike, remained invisible in the aftermath. Case in point: the 2016 Ramadan bombing near Mosul University that killed five civilians and wounded four. The military reported injuries to two civilians who had been in the pre-strike footage.

Cases Closed

When the military receives an allegation of civilian casualties, it runs through a checklist to determine whether the case merits further inquiry. Most never reach the point of video review. About a quarter of the noncredible cases were summarily closed because they lacked sufficient information or detail, such as a specific location or 48-hour time frame. But more than half were rejected, in some cases erroneously, because the military could find no record of corroborating strikes in the geographic area identified in the allegation — or because there were too many potential matches, and too little detailed information.

That information would be found in official logs maintained by different strike authorities. But The Times found numerous instances in which the logs were incomplete or inaccurate: Often, records show, the coalition knew its logs were flawed.

Frequently, cases were closed because the military said it lacked the information to pinpoint the neighborhood in question. Sometimes that conclusion was rooted in misunderstandings of local custom and culture.

In January 2017, citing insufficient information, an officer quickly closed a case based on [social media reports](#) that civilians had been killed in a strike on a funeral in the al Shifaa neighborhood of West Mosul. Fruitlessly, the officer had searched logs for potentially corroborating strikes in the cemetery closest to that neighborhood.

However, as reflected in a graphic video accompanying the initial reports, the strike had not taken place at a cemetery: A thumbnail depicted the entrance to a house. In fact, Muslim funerals are rarely held at cemeteries. What's more, Muslims bury the dead quickly, and it had been four days since this man, Col. Aziz Ahmed Aziz Sanjari, had died.

The colonel's death had brought many members of the Sanjari family's tribe to their home to mourn. It was a sunny afternoon, so more than a dozen people sat outside. They could hear a drone humming above, but were unworried. It was a common occurrence. A few minutes later, the bomb hit. Eleven people were killed, The Times found.

‘Sometimes Bad Things Happen’

Captain Urban acknowledged that, “In some cases our assessment of the numbers of civilian casualties does not always match that of outside groups, and we acknowledge that those numbers may change over time as well.

“We do the best we can, given the circumstances, to understand fully the effects of our operations and the harm done to innocent life. That we sometimes do not always arrive at the same conclusion of outside groups does not diminish the sincerity with which we strive to get it right.”

Several Pentagon studies, rendered in military bureaucratese, have observed some of the failures of accountability.

The April 2018 Joint Chiefs of Staff examination of civilian deaths from airstrikes in the Middle East and Africa found that “feedback to subordinate commands on the cause and/or lessons learned from a civilian casualty incident is inconsistent.” The recent Pentagon Inspector General report spoke of “omissions.”

Yet for the most part, these reports do not speak to questions of how airstrikes repeatedly go wrong.

Mr. Lewis, the co-author whose efforts to analyze the assessments in aggregate were excised from the Joint Chiefs’ study, said the report instead relied primarily on interviews with assessment officers. They were able to detect certain patterns — especially casualties from secondary explosions and from people entering the target frame after a weapon’s firing — but few of the systematic reasons behind the bulk of civilian deaths.

The Times asked him why the military would develop such intricate procedures to prevent civilian casualties, and then assess them, but not prioritize documenting or studying causes and lessons learned. Not only does the system provide legitimacy for the military’s actions, he said; it also allows the United States to boast of a process that is a global model of accountability.

The former high-level American official in the campaign against ISIS said the procedures served an additional purpose — to provide a “psychological veneer” for the people involved: “We did the process. We did what we needed to do. Sometimes bad things happen.”

He said that after returning from his post, anguished by what he had seen, he had started therapy. He pointed to Raqqa, rendered a necropolis by American-led airstrikes, and compared it to the ruins of Aleppo, which was bombed by the Russians without the American military’s sophisticated considerations of proportionality — the collateral damage estimates, no-strike lists or rules of engagement.

“Eventually I stopped saying that this was the most precise bombing campaign in the history of warfare,” he said. “So what? It doesn’t matter that this was the most precise bombing campaign and the city looks like this.”

In Afghanistan

All the boys and men of Band-e-Timor knew that when the Toyota Hiluxes came, you should run for your life.

People called them wegos. At the wheel were Afghan paramilitary forces who usually set out on full-moon nights at the fork in the road before Lashkar Gah, charging through the village of Barang straddling the Kandahar-Helmand border and into other parts of Band-e-Timor, “capturing everyone: old men, young men, everyone,” said a resident named Matiullah.

It did not matter if you were not Taliban, people said. If you were male, the Afghan forces would arrest you, simply to collect a bounty for your release. If you were old or feeble, the price was just over \$500; a man in his prime would fetch twice that. “You would have to sell your cow or your land to get your relatives released,” said Rahmatullah, a village resident. Often, it was the poorest who would run.

On the night of Jan. 31, 2018, the moon was especially bright. The wegos, as usual, came accompanied by what villagers said were American aircraft. Hidayatullah, a driver by profession, three days from marrying, knew he could not afford the bounty and the wedding, so he drove out into the desert. Then an airstrike found him, said Matiullah, who is his cousin. Dozens of other civilians, mistaken for Taliban as they fled on foot and motorbike across Band-e-Timor, died in the raid as well.

The August drone strike in Kabul that killed an Afghan aid worker and nine of his relatives grabbed the world’s attention. But most American airstrikes in Afghanistan took place far from the cities, in remote areas where cameras were not filming, mobile lines were often cut and the internet was nonexistent.

America's longest war was, in many ways, its least transparent. For years, these rural battlefields were largely off-limits to American reporters. But after the Taliban returned to power in August, Afghanistan's hinterlands opened up.

The Times arrived in Barang a little over a month later, visiting 15 households in this hamlet of mud homes and farmland, and also interviewing tribal elders and others across Band-e-Timor. Most said they had never spoken to a journalist before. The accounts they gave — consistently and reliably, in hourslong interviews — help explain how America lost the country, how its war of airstrikes and support of corrupt security forces paved the way for the Taliban's return.

On average, each household lost five civilian family members. An overwhelming majority of these deaths were caused by airstrikes, most during wego raids. Many people admitted they had relatives who were Taliban fighters, but civilians accounted for most of those lost:

A father killed in an airstrike while running for the forest. A nephew killed as he slept with his flock of sheep. An uncle shot by American soldiers as he went to the bazaar to buy okra for dinner.

At the sound of helicopters, Hajji Muhammad Ismail Agha's sons had bounded for the desert. The "foreign helicopters" fired on them. One son, Nour Muhammad, was killed; the other, Hajji Muhammad, survived. "How could the planes tell the difference between a civilian and a Taliban?" the father asked. "He was killed just a little far from here. I watched it happen."

None of these incidents were mentioned in Pentagon press releases. Few were tallied in United Nations counts. So isolated from the Afghan government were residents that when asked for their loved ones' death certificates, they asked where they might obtain them. Instead, to verify deaths, The Times visited tombstones, in graveyards littered across the desert.

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[Read the military's full responses to questions from The Times.](#)

Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	12/19 Anti-5G network products: radioactive
SOURCE	https://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/ny-anti-5g-cell-network-radioactive-negative-ion-netherlands-recall-energy-armor-20211219-yyvu7oxzo5gcpaci4x37ypm5he-story.html
GIST	<p>Several products that claim to protect users from 5G cell networks were found to be radioactive, Dutch authorities said.</p> <p>On Thursday, the Dutch authority for nuclear safety and radiation protection urged users of 10 products — including sleeping masks, necklaces and bracelets for kids — to stop using or wearing them immediately, “put them away safely and wait for return instructions.”</p> <p>Researchers found that the products contain “radioactive substances” and, as a result, they “continuously emit ionizing radiation,” which can damage tissue and DNA, the agency said.</p> <p>Even though the amount of radiation measured on the examined products was low, “health damage cannot be completely ruled out,” which can include reddening of the skin.</p> <p>“The sellers in the Netherlands known to the ANVS have been told that the sale is prohibited and must be stopped immediately and that they must inform their customers about this,” the agency said.</p> <p>5G, or fifth generation, is the latest wireless mobile phone technology, which is expected to increase the performance in a wide range of applications.</p>

	<p>According to the World Health Organization, after much extensive research, “no adverse health effect has been causally linked with exposure to wireless technologies.”</p> <p>And even though only a few studies have analyzed the frequencies used by 5G, no consequences for public health are anticipated, “provided that the overall exposure remains below international guidelines.”</p> <p>However, that hasn’t stopped a growing market of “anti-5G” devices around the world, which are largely fueled by conspiracy theories.</p> <p>Products ranging from cellphone cases to pregnancy clothes to hats for kids can be easily found on Amazon and Etsy.</p> <p>The products identified by ANVS include a bracelet, necklace, and a sleeping mask made by a brand named Energy Armor; and a necklace, a silicone bracelet, and a “Sportboost bracelet with negative ions” made by Magnetix.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Renton police investigate 3 deaths in home
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/teen-girls-likely-died-5-days-before-father-renton-home-investigators-say/6HHAKQEALFFHZHAH2HD3VAYXGA/
GIST	<p>RENTON, Wash. — Two girls, a 16-year-old and 17-year-old, who were found dead inside of their father’s Renton home last weekend are estimated to have died on Dec. 5, before their father.</p> <p>Their father, whose body was found alongside them, is estimated to have died five days later, according to Renton police who got that information from the King County Medical Examiner’s Office.</p> <p>However, officials said those dates have a considerable margin of error as a report into their deaths has not been completed.</p> <p>KIRO 7 talked to the girl’s mother, Betsy Alvarado, on Wednesday and she said her daughters “were amazing.”</p> <p>Police have said there was no evidence of foul play, forced entry into the home, carbon monoxide poisoning or drug use, leaving the question open of how the three died.</p> <p>On Monday when KIRO 7 talked with Renton Police Department Detective Robert Onishi, he said, “Obviously, something killed them. We don’t know what.”</p> <p>Onishi also said, “We don’t often have death scenes where we have multiple bodies and no apparent, approximate cause.”</p> <p>“All I do all day is try to put things together,” said Alvarado. But despite all the questions, she and the girls’ stepfather, Ron Anderson, have their own theory.</p> <p>Alvarado identified the girls’ father and her former husband as 33-year-old Manuel Gil.</p> <p>Onishi said identifying the girls’ father was initially difficult because “his driver’s license was older. He also lost quite a bit of weight.”</p> <p>Onishi also said the only criminal history the girl’s father had with Renton police was a traffic infraction.</p> <p>Alvarado told KIRO 7 that the girls “were being brainwashed by what they were calling a religion but must be a cult.”</p>

	<p>She said her former husband was following an extremist fringe of the Black Hebrew Israelites. The Anti-Defamation League classifies some sects of the religion as a hate group.</p> <p>From the clothes they wore to their diet and even behavior, Anderson said he could see over the last two years how their lives started to change. “Everything just seemed to keep on progressing and getting more extreme and more extreme,” he said.</p> <p>Things became so extreme that Alvarado said she didn’t spend any quality time with her daughters over the last 10 months.</p> <p>Onishi added more information will be clear once the toxicology reports are released in a few weeks.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Minnesota: 7 found dead in home
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/19/us/moorhead-seven-dead-minnesota/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)Police discovered four adults and three children dead in a home in South Moorhead, Minnesota, home Saturday night.</p> <p>The relationship between the seven victims was not released, and police are still working to determine the circumstances surrounding the fatalities, the Moorhead Police Department said in a statement to CNN affiliate KVRr.</p> <p>Family members were conducting a welfare check when they discovered the bodies and called 911, CNN affiliate KARE reported. There were no signs of forced entry or violence at the home, according to KVRr.</p> <p>All seven victims have been transported to the Ramsey County Medical Examiner's Office, where their causes of death will be determined, police said.</p> <p>Police say the investigation is ongoing and that victim identifications will be released at a later time.</p> <p>Moorhead is in Clay County, just across the Red River from Fargo, North Dakota.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Leavenworth Christmas skirmish breaks out
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/the-war-on-christmas-rebranding-even-krampus-stirs-up-leavenworth/
GIST	<p>The way it’s been portrayed by two religion-advocacy groups, the war on Christmas has descended on the idyllic town of Leavenworth in the Cascade foothills.</p> <p>You know Leavenworth, the Bavarian-themed destination that puts up over 500,000 Christmas lights during the holidays, appropriately calling itself “Christmastown.” It’s so popular that lodging for Saturday night is mostly sold out, with one room at \$371.</p> <p>Charge No. 1: The Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce took the word “Christmas” out of the name for its famous holiday festival. The “Christmas Lighting Festival” was rebranded “Village of Lights,” the term commonly used on travel sites and news stories about the event, although the chamber had its official name as “Village of Lights: Christmastown.”</p> <p>Charge No. 2: On Dec. 4, on opening weekend of monthlong Christmas festivities, the town welcomed members of Krampus Seattle. They danced and paraded in their hairy, horned costumes inspired by the mythical Bavarian creature that’s half-demon, half-goat and that punishes those who misbehave at Christmas. The local chamber of commerce even promoted a “Krampus Drink Crawl.”</p> <p>According to the Lynnwood-based Family Policy Institute of Washington, headed by Mark Miloscia, conservative former state senator from Federal Way: “At an event that is supposed [to] honor the birth of</p>

Jesus Christ, town officials have chosen to include demonic influences . . . These attacks on Christianity are becoming the norm throughout the country.”

And, according to a headline at CatholicVote, of Carmel, Indiana, with 213,000 Facebook followers, “Washington town shocked by erasure of Christmas customs.”

P.R. trouble had come to this winter wonderland.

In response, the Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce on Wednesday issued a lengthy statement saying the accusations “are seriously lacking in facts” and were “derived from a rant on Facebook.”

Let’s dissect the sequence of events.

The rant that the chamber referred to was written by Ben Herreid, 39, co-owner of two restaurants in the area, including Larch, a “seasonal Northwest pasta” place in downtown Leavenworth. He’s a member of the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic men’s charitable organization.

For years, the Knights had a booth selling sausages at the Leavenworth Christmas festival. But this year, the chamber did not get access to Front Street’s right of way – this being the main drag through town – as it is now closed to traffic.

All of that boiled down to the Knights’ not getting a booth because it needed both electric power and water, and such a combination was not available, says the chamber. It’s complicated setting up everything from the winter market to the carolers to the live music.

That didn’t sit well with Herreid. On Dec. 5, he blasted off an email to Troy Campbell, head of the chamber, and posted it on Facebook.

“I’m pretty fired up right now,” Herreid wrote. “. . . the Knights represent a community and character that unfortunately are becoming all too rare . . . most of whom are elderly and are a dying breed.”

By then, Herreid had made a spot available on his restaurant’s patio for the sausage booth. Kim Washburn, state deputy for the Knights, who lives on Leavenworth’s outskirts, says the booth didn’t get much business this year because it was off the tourist path.

Herreid didn’t stop there. Something else was upsetting him:

“What is the unbelievable to me is that Christmas Town USA has decided to replace a family friendly ‘Christmas Lighting’ to celebrate the ‘Village of Lights.’ And this week the Chamber had the audacity/naivety/stupidity to kick off this non-holiday by inviting Krampus Seattle, a group of demonic horned half-goat cosplayers to give speeches at our pavilion and pub crawl throughout the downtown terrifying our children.”

The postings caught the attention of the two advocacy groups. Neither returned messages and emails for comment.

But the next battle in the war on Christmas was here.

Says Herreid, “It seems I hit a nerve with a lot of people.”

Krampus Seattle’s Facebook page representative is baffled.

“There is no war on Christmas,” he says. He provided his name but asked it not be printed.

“I’ve been hacked on my personal account. There seems to be some negativity out there,” he says.

He says a group of about 20 members of Krampus Seattle drove to Leavenworth to take part in the opening of the holiday festivities.

Dressing up as the creature was long banned by the Roman Catholic Church as a pagan tradition.

In mythology, during Christmas, according to Smithsonian Magazine, “While St. Nick is on hand to put candy in the shoes of good kids and birch twigs in the shoes of the bad, Krampus’ particular specialty is punishing naughty children. Legend has it that throughout the Christmas season, misbehaved kids are beaten with birch branches or can disappear, stuffed into Krampus’ sack and hauled off to his lair to be tortured or eaten.”

But in recent decades there was a resurgence and the story spread beyond Europe. Admittedly, if you’re of a certain mindset, it looks cool to parade around dressed up like that.

In Leavenworth, the Facebook page for Krampus Seattle shows tourists posing for photos, with comments such as, “All these kids smiling . . . Santa pics always have kids crying!”

Actually, Krampus has already been around for years in Leavenworth in the form of Krampus Kave, a comic book and game store.

“It was a pretty great event. It was a grand slam,” says store manager J. J. Hernandez, about that Saturday. “It was the busiest day we ever had. From what I could tell, everyone was loving it.”

Regarding the name change for the festivities, the Leavenworth Chamber of Commerce said the “Christmas Lighting Festival” title had been used for years on the first three weekends in December. Then, each Saturday and Sunday there was a “flip the switch” to turn on the light displays.

The chamber said 20,000-plus people would visit, all “looking for parking spots that did not exist” and causing “traffic backups for miles.” Now the lights stay on every day to spread out the crowds, and the organization says “a rebranding was necessary.” So, the new name: “Village of Lights.”

The chamber said the Krampus Seattle group had visited on its own in previous years.

This year, it said, “we made the decision to introduce them and explain to our visitors why they were in town and the German origin of Krampus . . . We also organized a drink crawl where some businesses offered themed drinks for adults to enjoy.”

The chamber statement said that it was “sorry if the Krampus have offended anyone.”

Herreid isn’t satisfied.

On Dec. 9 he posted on Facebook, “Let’s make sure that Krampus is not brought back another season.”

In addition, Kim Washburn, of the Knights of Columbus, says he worries when “demon followers” meet up with Christian types in Leavenworth.

“Then we’ll have a riot,” he says.

Really?

“I don’t know. It just worries me,” says Washburn.

The chamber responds about Krampus Seattle: “We have been asked to ‘not let them in town,’ and of course as we live in a free country, we enjoy the freedom to travel where we wish, Leavenworth is open to anyone at any time, as we welcome all.”

	Well, there is that point.
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HEADLINE	12/17 Scientists: extreme weather worst is ahead
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2021/12/17/climate-change-extreme-weather-future/
GIST	<p>Scores of studies presented this week at the world’s largest climate science conference offered an unequivocal and unsettling message: Climate change is fundamentally altering what kind of weather is possible, and its fingerprint can be found in the rising number of disasters that have claimed lives and upended livelihoods around the world.</p> <p>Record-shattering heat waves, devastating floods, scorching wildfires and persistent droughts are among the litany of catastrophes scientists say they can definitively link to human activities — primarily the burning of fossil fuels.</p> <p>The world must find a way to cope with this new era of climate disasters, researchers warn. Because without major changes, the forecast will grow only worse with time.</p> <p>“The weather of the past will not be the weather of the future,” said Stephanie Herring, a climate scientist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. “As long as we are emitting greenhouse gases at a historically unprecedented rate, we should expect this change to continue.”</p> <p>Herring has closely tracked the link between extreme weather and climate change since 2012, when she edited the first “Explaining Extreme Events from a Climate Perspective” report for the Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society. The annual survey of what is known as “attribution science” draws on weather records and sophisticated climate models to determine how much individual events were influenced by human emissions.</p> <p>It did not take long for the project to yield evidence of a transformed planet.</p> <p>In 2016, the hottest year scientists had yet recorded, hundreds of people in India died amid unprecedented heat waves. A gigantic “blob” of warm water formed in the Pacific. Toxic algae bloomed off the coast of Alaska, poisoning shellfish and causing seabirds to starve.</p> <p>The intensity of these events was beyond anything that existed in a preindustrial world.</p> <p>The latest edition of the “Explaining Extremes” report shows that the period between December 2019 and February 2020 was the warmest and wettest period in recorded Russian history — a thaw so acute it could not have happened if not for climate change. Melting permafrost belched carbon and destabilized homes. Bears were jolted out of hibernation. Moscow officials had to supplement their New Year’s celebrations with artificial snow.</p> <p>Just this summer, a dome of punishing heat descended on the Pacific Northwest, scorching crops, melting pavement and cooking a billion sea creatures inside their own shells. Hospitals saw 69 times the usual number of emergency room visits; one facility put patients in body bags filled with ice in a desperate effort bring their internal temperatures down. More than 1,000 people died.</p> <p>A rapid analysis conducted shortly after the event found that the heat wave would have been “virtually impossible” without human influence.</p> <p>“People are suffering and dying unnecessarily,” said Kristie Ebi, director of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at the University of Washington in Seattle and a contributor to the heat wave study. Speaking to reporters at the American Geophysical Union (AGU) meeting Thursday, Ebi pointed to research showing that more than a third of all heat wave deaths can now be linked to climate change. Children under 5 and adults over 65 — two of the groups most vulnerable to high temperatures — were collectively exposed to almost 4 billion more days of extreme heat in 2020 than the 1986-2005 average.</p>

Cassandra Rogers, a climate scientist at Washington State University, showed that the number of days per year with multiple major heat waves has spiked from about 20 in the early 1980s to roughly 150 now.

“Almost every day from June through September has two or more heat waves happening around the world,” she said.

With each incremental increase in temperature, climate change turbocharges Earth’s naturally-occurring processes.

As the atmosphere traps more heat, the ocean soaks up that energy and transforms it into fuel for hurricanes. High temperatures cause water to evaporate from vegetation and soil, amplifying drought. Warmer air can also hold more moisture, so that the rain that finally does fall comes in a deluge. Fires burn hotter in this world. Floods are faster, wetter, bigger.

“We’re putting enough energy in there that events we’ve always had are going to be even more powerful,” said oceanographer Susan Lozier, dean of the College of Sciences at the Georgia Institute of Technology and American Geophysical Union president.

Changing the amount of heat in the Earth system also changes how that heat gets distributed, Lozier added. Wind patterns and ocean currents are shifting. Monsoonal rains may come late, or not at all.

With global temperatures already more than 1.1 degrees Celsius (2 degrees Fahrenheit) higher than in the preindustrial era, the fingerprint of climate change has become easier and easier for scientists to see. In 2000, there were 14 studies containing the words “attribution” and “climate change” presented at the AGU fall meeting. In 2020, there were 213.

This year, the conference program is packed with sessions on climate and weather: “Effective communication of climate change risk”; “Implications of climate change, extreme events and adaptation potential for global agriculture”; “The past and future of fire.”

Every weather event is now indelibly marked by the fact that it’s happening in a warming world, Herring said. But that doesn’t mean the effect of climate change is always clear.

Tornadoes like those that ripped through Kentucky last weekend [are among the hardest events](#) to attribute. Though higher temperatures may favor conditions that allow big thunderstorms to form, especially in winter months, the factors that turn a storm into a twister are so complex scientists cannot yet say with confidence whether warming plays a role.

But there is no doubt that the world is not done changing. The ongoing burning of fossil fuels is continuing to pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and further heat the planet.

“We still are emitting CO₂, which means that conditions will keep worsening,” said Sonia Seneviratne, a Zurich-based climate analytics professor and an expert on extreme weather. “It’s not only a new normal. If anything, we have to get ready for summers that are much worse ahead.”

Seneviratne is among hundreds of authors of an [exhaustive climate report](#) published by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change this August. It found that humans can unleash less than 500 additional gigatons of carbon dioxide — the equivalent of about 10 years of current global emissions — if we wish to meet the Paris agreement’s most ambitious goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit).

Even at that level of warming, an event like Hurricane Maria — a “hundred year storm” in today’s world — would be expected to hit Puerto Rico [roughly once every 75 years](#). At 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels, [more than 10 million additional people](#) would be exposed to flooding from sea level rise. By 3 degrees, heat waves that once had a 2 percent chance of happening in a given year will become 27 times more likely.

That, Seneviratne said, is why it is imperative that humans find a way to cut emissions as quickly as possible.

“Even a tenth of a degree can make a difference,” she said.

But if recent catastrophes have not been enough to motivate action on the scale that is needed, Lozier wonders what will finally push people to transform the way they live, travel and grow food.

“How much worse does this have to get?” she said.

For Mayor Jan Polderman, as for many people in the British Columbia town of Lytton, the cost of climate change could not be more clear.

His scenic village near the confluence of the Fraser and Thompson rivers has endured one catastrophe after another. This summer, a day after it set Canada’s all-time heat record of 121 degrees, a [fast-moving wildfire tore through the area](#), devouring scores of homes and displacing residents who had hastily fled the flames.

More recently, as many residents remain scattered and await the chance to rebuild, flooding and brought on by torrential rain last month washed out main roads to the north and south of Lytton, Polderman said.

“A lot of people are very fragile at the moment,” the 62-year-old mayor said. “It’s been a very tough year.” Polderman spends a lot of time these days thinking about how the town can build back in a more resilient way, one that takes into account the prospect of hotter temperatures, longer droughts, more wildfires and heavier rain events.

“We need to plan for that, so we can live through it,” he said.

What he does not spend time on is wondering whether climate change is happening, and whether it will get worse. He has watched temperature records get obliterated in his town, wildfire consume the homes of friends and neighbors and biblical weather batter his province, all in the past year.

“I used to think that it was going to be the next generation that was going to have to deal with climate change. I think otherwise now,” Polderman said. “It’s something we better start dealing with sooner than later.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 White Christmas chances in climate change
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2021/12/18/white-christmas-chances-climate/
GIST	<p>The unforgettable lyric to Irving Berlin’s classic holiday song may need a rewrite: “I’m dreaming of a <i>warm</i> Christmas, <i>unlike</i> the ones I used to know” ...</p> <p>Exceptionally mild weather dominating the Lower 48 this month shows little sign of meaningful change through the Christmas holiday. This means rather underwhelming chances for a white Christmas in many parts of the United States, a state of affairs to which we probably should become accustomed.</p> <p>Our warming climate appears to be eating away at white Christmas chances, newly available data shows.</p> <p>This week, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration released white Christmas probabilities across the United States, basing them on the most recent 30 years of climate data that revealed broad decreases compared to just a decade ago. The changes “are consistent with the reality of long-term warming,” NOAA wrote.</p>

The observed changes have been rather subtle, but “more areas experienced decreases in their chances of a white Christmas than increases,” the agency said. NOAA’s criterion for a white Christmas is one inch of snow on the ground on the morning of Dec. 25.

How have white Christmas chances changed in our nation’s cities in the past decade? We analyzed NOAA’s white Christmas data in the 25 biggest cities, from Seattle to D.C., and, unsurprisingly, found declines in most of them:

- 18 of the 25 cities saw their chance of a white Christmas decrease; Denver and Columbus saw the largest drops (six percentage points). D.C.’s odds of a white Christmas plummeted from around 8 percent to just a little over 4 percent.
- Four cities’ chances were unchanged (Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Portland and Dallas)
- Three saw their chances increase, but only by one or two percentage points (New York, Philadelphia and Raleigh)

(Boston — which was among the 25 cities — had incomplete snowfall data, so we substituted Providence, R.I.)

Our results are consistent with an [analysis from CNN](#), which found 64 percent of the 2,000 locations in NOAA’s database exhibited decreases in their white Christmas chances.

The Associated Press, using an analysis from the University of Arizona, also described a marked falloff in Christmas snow between the 1980s and 2010s. In the 1980s, 47 percent of the country had snow on the ground on Dec. 25, with an average depth of 3.5 inches. But, by the 2010s, the snow cover extent was just 38 percent, with an average depth of 2.7 inches.

Maps from NOAA help illustrate the white Christmas decline in parts of the country by comparing the periods 1981-2010 and 1991-2020.

“The easiest one [decline] to spot with the naked eye is the expansion of the dark gray area, where the chances of a white Christmas are less than 10%,” NOAA wrote. “The gray area shifted noticeably northward across the South, and upslope along the ocean-facing slopes of some of the West Coast mountain ranges.”

Rising temperatures are the probable reason for the most noticeable declines in southern areas because that circumstance increasingly favors rain rather than snow.

This year’s grim white Christmas chances

The Lower 48 has already seen three bouts of record-breaking warmth this month, with many areas on track for their warmest December on record. Accordingly, snow cover is considerably below normal across the country. As of Saturday, about 29 percent of the nation has snow cover compared to a more typical value of 37 percent. Only four years since 2003 have had less extensive snow cover than this one.

Computer models for the period around Christmas project a fourth burst of warmth that will probably greatly limit snow potential and melt away previous snow cover in a number of areas.

While the specifics are subject to change, the temperature forecast for Christmas over the Lower 48 looks much like it has so often this month. Model simulations show a high likelihood of milder than average weather over much of the country, with abnormally warm weather in the central states, especially the Southern Plains. Chillier-than-normal conditions are isolated to the very north central U.S. and perhaps parts of California.

The European modeling system’s simulation of snow cover on Christmas morning only shows at least an inch of snow in northern New England, the northern Great Lakes and Upper Midwest, and Mountain West. The Mountain West will, by far, be the most wintry part of the country, especially in the Cascades and Sierras, where a succession of storms will have unloaded massive amounts of snow.

	<p>A number of places that typically have white Christmases, such as large parts of Iowa, Wisconsin and even southern Minnesota, which recently experienced tornadoes, may well awaken to bare ground on Dec. 25.</p> <p>Welcome to the new normal.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Concern: Antarctica giant 'doomsday' glacier
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/18/scientists-watch-giant-doomsday-glacier-in-antarctica-with-concern
GIST	<p>Twenty years ago, an area of ice thought to weigh almost 500bn tonnes dramatically broke off the Antarctic continent and shattered into thousands of icebergs into the Weddell Sea.</p> <p>The 1,255-sq-mile (3,250-sq-km) Larsen B ice shelf was known to be melting fast but no one had predicted that it would take just one month for the 200-metre-thick behemoth to completely disintegrate.</p> <p>Glaciologists were shocked as much by the speed as by the scale of the collapse. "This is staggering. It's just broken apart. It fell over like a wall and has broken as if into hundreds of thousands of bricks", said one.</p> <p>This week, ice scientists meeting in New Orleans warned that something even more alarming was brewing on the West Antarctic ice sheet – a vast basin of ice on the Antarctic peninsula. Years of research by teams of British and American researchers showed that great cracks and fissures had opened up both on top of and underneath the Thwaites glacier, one of the biggest in the world, and it was feared that parts of it, too, may fracture and collapse possibly within five years or less.</p> <p>Thwaites makes Larsen B look like an icicle. It is roughly 100 times larger, about the size of Britain, and contains enough water on its own to raise sea levels worldwide by more than half a metre. It contributes about 4% of annual global sea level rise and has been called the most important glacier in the world, even the "doomsday" glacier. Satellite studies show it is melting far faster than it did in the 1990s.</p> <p>Thwaites is worrisome, but there are many other great glaciers in Antarctica also retreating, thinning and melting as the Southern Ocean warms. Many are being held back because Thwaites acts like a cork, blocking their exit to the sea. Should Thwaites fall apart, scientists believe the others would speed up, leading to the collapse of the whole ice sheet and catastrophic global sea level rises of several metres.</p> <p>Whether and how quickly they may collapse are some of the most important questions of the age. Sea levels are rising fast: the annual rate of increase more than doubling from 1.4mm to 3.6mm between 2006 and 2015, and accelerating. A few millimetres a year does not sound much but the loss of even a small part of Thwaites would not just help to speed this up further but would likely increase the severity of storm surges.</p> <p>Should all West Antarctica's glaciers ever collapse, there is no coastal city in the world that would not, over time, be swamped at ruinous cost to life and economies.</p> <p>The consensus of glaciologists used to be that it would take centuries of global heating before glaciers the size of Thwaites shattered and collapsed, but so rapid and unexpected has been the loss of sea ice at the opposite end of the earth in the Arctic, and so sudden was the loss of Larsen B that it is now considered possible it could happen rapidly in Antarctica, too.</p> <p>Ice loss in the Arctic barely affects sea levels because it mostly forms at sea. Antarctic ice, however, is mostly on land so any melting adds to sea levels.</p> <p>The tipping point for the Larsen B ice shelf came suddenly. How Thwaites and other glaciers respond to global heating is still not known but these big global physical processes are under way and can be addressed only by global action.</p>

Yet just one month after Cop26 ended in Glasgow, the warning that the 300-metre thick, 50-mile wide Thwaites glacier has started to crack up has been met with silence from governments preoccupied by Covid-19 and the return of normal politics. The danger is that the many actions pledged in November to address global heating will be shelved for another year, to become just one more risk in an increasingly dangerous world.

Thwaites underlines that global heating and glaciers do not wait for politicians, and every year action to reduce climate emissions is delayed only accelerates global disaster.

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	12/19 Mayors criticize King Co. juvenile justice
SOURCE	https://www.seattleweekly.com/news/crime-conscious-mayors-criticize-king-countys-juvenile-justice-program/
GIST	<p>Mayors Nancy Backus of Auburn, Jim Ferrell of Federal Way, Dana Ralph of Kent, and Armondo Pavone of Renton met on Dec. 15 with King County Executive Dow Constantine, King County Prosecutor Dan Satterberg, and senior staff in hopes of cultivating a collaboratively approach toward crime reduction solutions.</p> <p>“Our meeting was productive and will require much more effort to effectively reach a consensus on how we may reduce these troubling trends in our communities,” according to a joint statement from the mayors.</p> <p>During the meeting, the mayors learned that the King County Prosecutor’s Office implemented a diversion program last month for juveniles who enter the criminal justice system. The program is called Restorative Community Pathways (RCP).</p> <p>Federal Way Mayor Jim Ferrell said neither the fellow mayors nor police chiefs were informed of the program’s operations, the presentation to their law enforcement department members, or its start date.</p> <p>“All of us were surprised to learn they’ve already started,” Ferrell said on Dec. 16.</p> <p>The presentation was given on Dec. 14 at the request of law enforcement and school resource officers after the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office reached out, said Douglas Wagoner of the prosecutor’s office. The Restorative Community Pathways program started in November, he added.</p> <p>According to the mayors’ statement, they are “alarmed to learn that felonies such as bringing a gun or other weapon to school or a physical assault will not result in an arrest, at a time when we are seeing rising violence and mental health crises in schools.”</p> <p>Created by King County Senior Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Ben Carr, the presentation outlines the eligible offenses so “youth who cause harm will be held appropriately accountable by the community and have their individual needs met, thereby reducing the likelihood of future harm,” according to the report.</p> <p>The eligible offenses include third- and fourth-degree assault, felony harassment, organized retail theft, unlawful display or display of a weapon, possession of a stolen vehicle, robbery, residential burglary, and drug violations, among other offenses.</p> <p>The mayors collectively agreed they support restorative justice for simple misdemeanor crimes for first-time juvenile offenders, but “failure to prosecute felony crimes is taking King County in the wrong direction and is making our communities less safe.”</p>

The South King County mayors are asking for an immediate pause on the program so the cities and county leadership can work together to find a solution, according to the statement.

“Together, we can find a balance between restorative justice and the safety of our communities,” the statement reads. “We have offered to continue working toward better solutions that will reduce crime. It is our sincere belief that in working together we can address these serious crimes and keep our communities safe.”

King County’s response

King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg and Executive Dow Constantine in a joint statement said it was “disappointing” to see the mayors’ statement after the “productive discussion.”

Reducing violence in King County communities is a shared goal as elected officials, and is why King County leaders agreed to meet with the mayors, the statement said.

“Restorative Community Pathways (RCP) is an evidence-based strategy for holding young people who commit a first-time offense accountable, reducing youth incarceration, and racial disproportionality in the juvenile justice system,” the statement continued. “In doing so, this effort aims to help youth turn their lives around and stop them from becoming repeat offenders.”

RCP also “makes historic investments in supporting victims of crime through restitution and connection to services.”

The King County leaders said it is also disappointing to see the program “attacked when the program launched only one month ago.” The RCP program was unanimously approved by the King County Council, signed by Constantine and is supported by juvenile justice stakeholders, according to the statement.

“Importantly, RCP will be evaluated to determine effectiveness for both the youth who committed the crime and the harmed party.”

“If we want different outcomes in our communities, we can’t just keep doing the same, ineffective thing — we must invest in proven solutions that work and that address root causes,” the statement concludes.

On Dec. 17, the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office released the presentation they shared at the Dec. 15 meeting with the mayors.

Auburn, Federal Way, Kent and Renton make up more than one-quarter (27%) of the felony filings charged by the prosecutor, according to Casey McNerthney, director of communications for the prosecuting attorney’s office. On average, he said, the office files more cases from the four South King County cities than any other agencies in King County. This results in about 10 filings per day from South King County, he said, meaning their filing decline rate is lower for these cities than other agencies.

Cases submitted by police for prosecution are down overall this year compared to last, McNerthney said, which could be related to staffing changes of detectives that agencies like Seattle are experiencing.

In Federal Way, there were 628 police department filings in 2020. This year shows 439 filings so far as of Dec. 1. Decreases are shown in second-degree assault and first-degree robbery filings.

Just because a case is filed by police doesn’t mean all of those cases can be filed, McNerthney said. Often filings are declined because the case is legally insufficient.

	<p>“That’s not blaming police,” he said. “Sometimes cases that are investigated as well as they can be cannot be proved beyond a reasonable doubt, and we are required to only file cases where we have a good faith belief that we can prove a case beyond a reasonable doubt.”</p> <p>While drug possession cases are not sent to the prosecutor’s office, drug dealing cases are “consistently” prosecuted by the office, he added. So far this year, there have been 157 drug dealing cases charged.</p> <p>This year also shows the lowest number of misdemeanor and felonies referrals for juvenile offenders compared to both 2019 and 2020. Through Dec. 16, there have been 1,103 referrals, McNerthney said.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Police investigate bank explosion Centralia
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/authorities-investigating-after-explosion-bank-centralia/FGJY5IQKARET3H7KG6QMOU43Z4/
GIST	<p>CENTRALIA, Wash. — Law enforcement is investigating after an explosion occurred at a bank in Centralia Sunday morning.</p> <p>The explosion occurred at approximately 6:40 a.m. in an ATM at the First Security Bank located in the 600 block of S. Tower Avenue.</p> <p>Two unidentified suspects used an unknown improvised explosive device to gain entry to the ATM. After the explosion, the suspects took the contents of the ATM and fled from the scene.</p> <p>The suspects were driving a late 1990s or early 2000s light-colored four-door Honda Accord.</p> <p>One of the suspects is a white male adult. A description was not provided for the second suspect.</p> <p>The Centralia police department is working with the FBI and Washington State Patrol bomb squad to investigate the incident.</p> <p>Anyone who believes they have information about the incident or the suspects involved are asked to call the Centralia police department at 360-330-7680 or Lewis County communications at 360-740-1105.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/19 Reform racial discrimination jury selection
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/racial-discrimination-jury-selection/2021/12/18/2b6ec690-5382-11ec-8ad5-b5c50c1fb4d9_story.html
GIST	<p>As efforts to reform the criminal justice system at the federal level have largely stalled, state policymakers are opening a new front in the fight to reduce bias in the system by aiming to eliminate racial discrimination in jury selection.</p> <p>Some high-profile trials with nearly all-White juries, including those of Kyle Rittenhouse in Kenosha, Wis., and the three men who chased down and killed Ahmaud Arbery last year in Glynn County, Ga., where the judge had acknowledged that there appeared to be “intentional discrimination” in jury selection, have brought renewed attention to how America’s juries often do not reflect their communities.</p> <p>Earlier this month, a panel of nine White jurors, two Asian jurors and one Black juror began hearing testimony in the trial of Kimberly Potter, a former suburban Minneapolis police officer who is charged with manslaughter in the killing of Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old Black man, during a traffic stop last spring. The two alternates are also White. The trial is being held in Hennepin County, where more than one in three residents are non-White.</p> <p>Nearly four decades after the Supreme Court established a precedent meant to eliminate racial discrimination in jury selection, the problem remains widespread, research shows. Most often the practice</p>

occurs through a legal tactic called a [peremptory challenge](#), which allows an attorney to strike a potential juror without having to state a reason.

But critics says lawyers have found ways to get around the Supreme Court's prohibition against discrimination in jury selection by asking potential Black jurors such questions as, "Have you ever had a bad encounter with the police?" If the potential juror says yes, they could be dismissed for perceived bias against police. One study in the Deep South found that Black jurors were being challenged and dismissed at double or triple the rates of other people.

Elisabeth Semel, a director of the Death Penalty Clinic at the University of California Berkeley School of Law, said that the South is no anomaly in this respect.

"In every study that I know of that has been done across the country, looking both in state courts and in federal courts, there has been a universal finding," Semel said. "The exercise of racially discriminatory peremptory strikes remains an ever present feature of the jury selection system. So you can pick California, you can pick North Carolina, you can pick Connecticut, you can pick the state of Washington, Oregon, on and on. And the results are unremarkably the same."

The push by states to eliminate racial discrimination in the selection process gained momentum three years ago with action by the Washington Supreme Court and most recently by the Arizona Supreme Court. In 2018, the Washington high court adopted a rule that made it easier for opposing lawyers to challenge a peremptory strike without having to prove intentional discrimination, as is the case under the United States Supreme Court precedent. In 2020, California passed legislation that codified much of Washington's rule into California law. In September, the Arizona high court abolished peremptory challenges altogether. Meanwhile, the courts in Connecticut and New Jersey are studying the issue.

Research shows that racially diverse juries spend more time deliberating, make fewer errors and can result in fairer trials. But African Americans have been fighting for access to jury boxes for more than 150 years, since the 14th Amendment enshrined Black people's right to full political participation. A generation later, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, which included provisions explicitly outlawing racial discrimination in jury selection. In 1986, the Supreme Court found that discrimination remained pervasive in jury selection.

The reasons behind America's overwhelmingly white juries are many. The problem begins with the way people are summoned for jury duty, said William Snowden, who founded a nonprofit called the Juror Project after witnessing a lack of jury diversity — in race, ideology, and life experience — as a public defender in New Orleans.

Many places use voter registration files and DMV records to find potential jurors, skewing the jury pool toward people who remain at one address for a long period of time, a group that tends to be more White than the population as a whole. Some jurisdictions also make those with felony convictions ineligible, disproportionately excluding people of color. Experts also note that the juror pay system tends to make jury service impossible for all but those who can afford to miss work.

Potential jurors of color are often eliminated during voir dire, the preliminary examination of jurors by the judge and attorneys to winnow the pool. One of the most typical questions asked of potential jurors in a criminal case where police will testify, for instance, is whether they have ever had a bad experience with police. An honest answer from a Black person is likely to result in dismissal, as research shows African Americans tend to experience negative encounters with law enforcement at a far higher rate than other Americans.

An unexpected spokesperson

Ausha Byng testified before the Washington Supreme Court in 2017, during a symposium on racial bias in jury selection. After two hours of listening intently to legal experts flown in from all over the country, the then-30-year-old mother and accountant told the justices of her experience of being summoned for duty in Renton, Wash.

Byng, who is biracial, recalled for the justices how excited she was when she received her summons in the mail. “Most people get the notices and they don’t want to do it,” Byng testified. “But me, I was excited,” noting how she likes to watch shows like “Law & Order.”

“I want to hear all the pieces of the puzzle and I want to put it together,” she said.

Byng, who was at the time balancing a family with going to college, notified her professors and arranged child care for her infant daughter. She didn’t have a car then, so when the day came, she rode the bus to the courthouse. And then she sat and waited. After lunch, Byng was selected as a potential juror for a drug case against a young Black man.

She said she remembers the prosecutor asked most of his questions to the entire panel of potential jurors but singled her out for one question. He asked her if she trusted the police. Byng, the only person of color in the jury pool, said no. And with that answer, the prosecutor pronounced, “The state would like to thank and excuse juror number five.”

Byng remembers the courtroom falling silent. She could feel everyone’s eyes on her. The judge asked to speak to the attorneys in private. Byng and the other potential jurors were placed in a back room for 30 minutes as the attorneys discussed her dismissal.

“It was long enough for all the other juror prospects to kind of like make fun of me, like what did you do? What did you say?” she recalled in her testimony to the justices. “I was extremely embarrassed. And I felt really excluded because it was very obvious that I was the reason that we all needed to leave.”

When the deliberations concluded, the judge ruled that Byng’s dismissal was legal. Lila Silverstein, an appellate public defender at the Washington Appellate Project, said Byng’s experience isn’t uncommon. Silverstein said prosecutors often use racially neutral questions like “do you trust the police?” as a litmus test for potential jurors of color.

Byng, who was raised by a White mom and Black dad, stands by her answer. Her father’s run-ins with Seattle police provide her with some of her earliest memories, and she’s had her own issues with local police. She said what made her want to testify at the Washington Supreme Court, years after she was dismissed from that jury, was the belief that she shouldn’t have to lie to serve.

“They didn’t ask me why. They didn’t ask, well, what happened with the police?” Byng said. “They asked me if I could be impartial, and I said yeah. But that wasn’t enough. I’m not going to lie to be on a jury.”

The prosecutor used a peremptory challenge to dismiss Byng. In 1986, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Batson v. Kentucky* that the opposing attorney can object to a peremptory strike but has to show that the dismissal was an act of intentional racial discrimination. Advocates for increasing jury diversity say that bar has proven to be nearly impossible to clear. But in 2018, thanks to Byng and Silverstein’s advocacy, Washington became the first state to adopt rules aimed at eliminating not just intentional, but also implicit, bias in jury selection.

Peremptory strikes are still allowed in Washington but, instead of forcing the objecting attorney to prove that the dismissal was racially motivated, the 2018 change directs judges to ask themselves if they think “an objective observer could view race or ethnicity as a factor in the use of the peremptory challenge.”

The rule goes on to define an objective observer as someone who “is aware that implicit, institutional, and unconscious biases, in addition to purposeful discrimination, have resulted in the unfair exclusion of potential jurors in Washington state.” If the judge thinks an objective observer could see race as a factor, they must deny the peremptory strike.

“Anecdotally, we are seeing that lawyers are being much more careful about exercising peremptory challenges to exclude jurors and that judges are sustaining objections to peremptory challenges much more

frequently than they did before,” Silverstein said. “On the appellate level, there have been several cases over the last few years where the courts are reversing convictions where lawyers exercised inappropriate peremptory challenges,” she added, noting that in State v. Jefferson, the Washington Supreme Court reversed a murder conviction.

This has been a major shift in Washington, said Silverstein, who added that there had never been a reversal for racial discrimination in jury selection in the state before the new rule, despite the issue being raised more than 40 times since the federal Supreme Court decision in Batson v. Kentucky.

It’s exactly what Thurgood Marshall, the Supreme Court’s first Black justice, predicted would happen when he wrote a concurring opinion in the Batson case. He wrote that lawyers would come up with ostensibly “race neutral” reasons to reject Black jurors and that it would be next to impossible to prove the reason for striking a juror was intentional discrimination.

Semel has documented how states have been curtailing peremptory strikes as part of broader efforts to root out discrimination in the criminal justice system in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and other cases.

In August 2020, she helped spearhead a successful effort to get a version of Washington’s juror selection rules written into California law.

“I’m being frank and realistic in saying that we had the advantage of the moment,” Semel said. “We got this passed in August 2020, just a few months after George Floyd was murdered, and it was one of several racial justice pieces that passed in the wake of his murder.”

In August this year, the Arizona Supreme Court eliminated peremptory strikes altogether, and lawmakers have introduced bills like Semel’s in several states across the country, including Massachusetts and Mississippi.

For Semel, however, reforming peremptory strikes is only part of the fight.

“This cannot be an isolated remedy,” she said. “We have systematic exclusion from the very beginning of the process all the way through. The unaffordability of jury service is so significant. When you’re paying jurors \$12 or \$15 a day, who can possibly sit on a jury for a week and or two or even months? You’re eliminating everyone who isn’t independently wealthy.”

Nearly five years after she testified before the Washington Supreme Court, Byng is still waiting for her chance to serve on a jury. Earlier this year, she received another jury notice but wasn’t picked for a case. Still, she is excited that the issue of racial discrimination in jury selection is getting national attention, especially as she has been reading the news about recent trials like the one for Arbery’s killers.

“Black people are having to stand up for everything and this is just another little circle of everything,” Byng said. “We need to be represented everywhere and we’ve obviously not being represented on juries ... We have to change that and if we did, I feel pretty sure we’d get better results and better juries.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 Self-described Incel pleads guilty: stalking
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/self-described-incel-pleads-guilty-to-stalking-multiple-victims-california-incel-killer/
GIST	Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Michael J. Driscoll, the Assistant Director-in-Charge of the New York Field Office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (“FBI”), Dermot Shea, Police Commissioner of the City of New York (“NYPD”), and Kevin P. Bruen, Superintendent of the New York State Police (“NYSP”), announced today the guilty plea of DAVID KAUFMAN, a/k/a “David Khalifa,” a/k/a “John Morray,” a/k/a “Big Man,” to stalking multiple victims

between October 2019 and August 2020. KAUFMAN pled guilty today before U.S. District Judge Nelson S. Román, to whom the case is assigned.

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said: “As he admitted in court, David Kaufman is an adherent of the ‘Incels’ who stalked and terrorized two victims, not only harassing them by impersonating them online, but also graphically threatening to murder them. Thanks to the FBI, the NYPD, the State Police, and other law enforcement partners, Kaufman is in custody and awaiting sentencing for his admitted crime.”

FBI Assistant Director Michael J. Driscoll said: “Kaufman’s overt hatred of women and sickening threats to harm potential victims caught the eye of the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force in New York. We know acts of violence among those in the Incel community have increased in recent years. As Kaufman’s guilty plea brings this topic closer to the forefront, we want the public to know the law enforcement community is aware of the threat and working together to confront it.”

NYSP Superintendent Kevin P. Bruen said: “I applaud the hard, difficult work done by law enforcement in this case, which has led to this plea and ensures the defendant will be held accountable for his crimes. We have zero tolerance for anyone who creates fear online, terrorizing victims because of their gender. Together, we will continue to seek justice for those who have been victimized and protect those vulnerable to these types of crimes.”

NYPD Commissioner Dermot Shea said: “The abhorrent acts carried out by David Kaufman are not just isolated offenses but representative of a larger pattern of criminality that tears at the very fabric of our society. I commend our NYPD detectives, our law enforcement partners, those in the FBI’s New York Joint Terrorism Task Force, and the prosecutors in the United States Attorney’s Office in the Southern District of New York for their hard work in ensuring a measure of justice was achieved today.”

According to the allegations in the Complaint and the Indictment, as well as statements made in White Plains federal court:

Background on “Incels”

KAUFMAN self-identifies as a member of the “Incels,” or the “Involuntary Celibate,” which refers to a group of individuals, typically heterosexual, white males, who adhere to a violent and misogynist ideology of male supremacy. Incels believe they are entitled to sex with women and to women’s bodies, and they blame women for refusing to have sex with them. Incels have an active online community and over the last seven years, Incels also have committed acts of violence against women across the world, including in the United States. For example, in 2014, a self-proclaimed Incel named Elliot Rodger declared a “War on Women” and killed six people and injured 14 others near a college campus in California. Prior to these attacks, Rodger posted a video manifesto online, in which he explained that he planned his attack to punish women for rejecting him and for depriving him of sex, and to punish sexually active men because he envied them.

KAUFMAN Harasses and Threatens Victim-1 and Victim-2

Beginning in or about October 2019, KAUFMAN sent two victims (“Victim-1” and “Victim-2”), among others, violent and threatening messages using various social media accounts. In these messages, KAUFMAN self-identified as an Incel and expressed his hatred of women. For example:

- On or about June 24, 2020, KAUFMAN sent the following message to Victim-1: “Hey wanna hear a joke? What’s worse than 10 Stacy’s nailed to one tree? One Stacy nailed to ten trees [laughing crying face emoji].” “Stacy” is an Incel term that refers to an attractive female who rejects or refuses to have sex with an Incel, is hated by Incels, and is targeted by Incels for harassment, vitriol, humiliation, and violence.
- On or about June 29, 2020, KAUFMAN sent a series of messages to Victim-2. These messages included an image of one of Elliot Rodger’s victims, a deceased female who had been stabbed to death, accompanied by the following message: “This is what happened when a woman said ‘no’ to Elliot Rodger . . . Hopefully [Victim-1] never said no to someone just like Elliot Rodger.”
- In or about July 2020, KAUFMAN posted the following messages: “Don’t piss off BIG MAN” and “When [Victim-1] and I are dead, we’ll be in heaven together forever.”

- On or about July 11, 2020, KAUFMAN sent the following message to Victim-1: “Women have done nothing but spit in my face. Soon I’ll be getting a gun.”
- On or about July 12, 2020, KAUFMAN posted the following messages: “A beautiful environment is the darkest hell, if you have to experience it all alone . . . –Elliot Rodger” and “I don’t think [Victim-1] will be laughing too much later on.”

KAUFMAN also created social media accounts using the first and last names of Victim-1 and Victim-2, respectively, and impersonated Victim-1 and Victim-2 online.

In the summer of 2020, law enforcement officers approached KAUFMAN and told him to stop harassing Victim-1 and Victim-2. On or about July 14, 2020, an order of protection was issued in Westchester County ordering KAUFMAN to, among other things, refrain from communication or any other contact with Victim-1 or Victim-2.

Notwithstanding the order of protection and warnings by law enforcement, KAUFMAN continued to send harassing and threatening messages to Victim-1 and Victim-2 through in or about August 2020. On or about August 16, 2020, KAUFMAN posted a picture of himself licking a photograph of Victim-1. KAUFMAN also conducted online surveillance of Victim-1’s residence and researched how to illegally purchase a gun and assemble a semi-automatic rifle.

* * *

KAUFMAN, 27, of Peekskill, New York, pled guilty to one count of stalking, in violation of 18 U.S.C. §§ 2261A(2)(a) and 2261(b)(6), which carries a mandatory minimum sentence of one year in prison and a maximum sentence of five years in prison. The statutory minimum and maximum potential sentences in this case are prescribed by Congress and are provided here for informational purposes only, as any sentencing of the defendant will be determined by the judge. KAUFMAN is scheduled to be sentenced before Judge Román on March 16, 2022, at 2:00 p.m.

Mr. Williams praised the outstanding efforts of the FBI’s New York Joint Terrorism Task Force, which principally consists of agents from the FBI and detectives from the NYPD, as well as the NYSP. Mr. Williams also thanked the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Cortlandt County Police Department, the Stamford Police Department, the Peekskill Police Department, the Mt. Pleasant Police Department, and the Westchester County District Attorney’s Office for their assistance and cooperation.

This prosecution is being handled by the Office’s Terrorism and International Narcotics Unit. Assistant U.S. Attorney Jane Kim is in charge of the prosecution.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Myanmar coup opens drug trade floodgates
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/m7vqm3/myanmar-coup-golden-triangle-drug-trade-asia
GIST	<p>In the back of the truck was enough methamphetamine to get more than 65 million people high—but the driver said he didn’t know anything about that.</p> <p>As far as he was concerned, the 22-year-old would later claim, he was just transporting crates of empty beer bottles through Bokeo Province, a hilly region in the northwestern corner of Laos that happens to sit at the heart of the Golden Triangle. The mountainous area, where the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand meet, is a wellspring for the world’s illegal drug trade.</p> <p>Less than 80 miles away was the border of Myanmar’s Shan State, one of the largest meth-producing areas on the planet. It was the night of Oct. 27, 2021, when police raided the 12-wheeler and found, hidden among the stacks of bright yellow Lao Brewery crates, more than 1.5 tonnes of crystal meth, or “ice,” and over 55 million yaba tablets, otherwise known as “crazy pills.” It was and still is the biggest single drug bust in Asia’s history, and on the surface level, a major win for narcotics police.</p> <p>It was also, however, just the latest case in a rapidly accelerating trend: a growing deluge of illicit substances that has spilled over the Burmese borders and flooded Southeast Asia throughout 2021. The Golden Triangle, that notorious nerve centre of the international drug trade, is flourishing more than</p>

ever. And much of that, it seems, can be traced back to a single, pivotal event on the morning of Feb. 1: Myanmar's military launched a coup d'état against Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government and seized control of the country. Ten months later, there are fears that the increasingly embattled nation could start resembling a narcostate.

The fallout from the putsch has turned Myanmar on its head, diverting authorities' attention toward matters of civil unrest and rending open cracks in the country's border security. The drug traffickers, forever opportunists, are capitalising on the shake-up. Huge quantities of drugs that previously would have been caught at the source are now flowing through increasingly porous sections of the border and into the lucrative markets of Asia-Pacific.

Two days after the beer-truck drug bust on Oct. 27, Jeremy Douglas, Southeast Asia regional representative for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), told VICE World News that the historic seizure was "no doubt connected to the deterioration of security and governance in [Myanmar's] Shan State."

The noticeable uptick in drug trafficking activity in Asia overall, he later added, appears to be directly linked to the coup.

"The recent surge in supply hitting the region just happens to have happened as the situation deteriorated," he said. "Hard to see the two things being unrelated."

The Burmese army seized control of Myanmar in the early hours of that February morning—12 weeks after the National League for Democracy (NLD) won the country's democratic election by a landslide.

The military, refusing to accept the inevitable defeat of its own party in the polls, had been leveling accusations of electoral fraud against the NLD for months. Finally, in a pre-dawn raid, they swooped in and detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint and other senior members of the party, declaring a 12-month state of emergency and handing all executive, legislative and judicial powers to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

In less than 24 hours, the civilian government was deposed. The junta was now in charge.

Within days, the nation erupted into protests. A wave of anti-coup resistance rippled across the country, as opponents of the military power-grab took to the streets and dozens of guerrilla and grassroots militias emerged to denounce the junta. By the end of June, over 4,700 anti-coup demonstrations [reportedly took place in Myanmar](#).

Authorities have met the dissent with a campaign of military violence and mass arrests. The country is spiraling ever deeper into crisis—and the imploding security situation has, inevitably, diverted police away from the front lines of the war on drugs.

"The operational focus of the MPF [Myanmar Police Force] has very noticeably and publicly shifted to dealing with protest, social unrest and almost counterinsurgency efforts," said Douglas.

This created a golden opportunity for drug traffickers. Richard Horsey, senior Myanmar adviser to the International Crisis Group (ICG), told VICE World News that while the rest of the Myanmar economy has crashed under the weight of the pandemic and coup, it's a good time to be in the drug business.

"The military and police are focused on trying to suppress a determined resistance movement, and drug issues have even less attention," said Horsey. "The criminal organisations and militias have seized the opportunity to ramp up [drug] production. And the Myanmar military has a host of new enemies and no interest in picking fights with the militias involved in the trade."

As the security situation within Myanmar collapses, the shockwaves of the February coup are reverberating down the supply chain. The country's police force is hamstrung, and drug syndicates in

Shan State appear to be making meth while the sun shines—lighting a fire under their operations and pumping huge quantities of drugs through widening cracks in the country’s international borders.

As Douglas put it: “Conditions on the ground are basically perfect for traffickers.”

Seizures have noticeably picked up in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia since at least June, as well as further afield in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia. By September, Malaysia’s narcotics crime agency had already seized more than \$180 million worth of illicit substances—a 150 percent increase compared to the entirety of 2020. Thailand has similarly clocked record levels, while Laos has seen six times as much meth seized within its borders this year compared to last.

Large-scale seizures have also persisted into late 2021. Earlier this month, Thai police [pulled over a monk](#) driving a pickup truck with more than 5.6 million yaba pills in the back. Days earlier, authorities in Chiang Rai [pulled over another truck](#) carrying 2.6 million pills, and days before that, Indonesian police [seized 100 kilograms](#) of crystal meth packaged up inside distinctive, green-and-gold Chinese tea packets.

According to Douglas, almost all of these drugs can be traced back to a single source: the rugged jungles and frontier towns of Shan State. Nuzzling the borders of China, Laos and Thailand, Shan has long been a regional epicentre for the production of yaba. More recently, it’s also become a fountainhead for crystal meth.

“Supply in the region is almost entirely sourced back to remote and border areas of Shan,” Douglas said. “Intel, methods used by traffickers and forensics all point to the fact [that] drug supply in the region emanates largely from [there].”

The syndicates are diversifying and expanding their operations, he explained—and countries right across the region are feeling the effects.

“The impact is being most acutely felt in Thailand, Laos and Malaysia—but Hong Kong, Cambodia, the Philippines and Indonesia are reporting large drug seizures that can be traced back to the Triangle.”

Myanmar has a long and fraught history with drugs. Since the 1950s, the country has straddled one of the largest opium-producing areas in the world, and remains the [second-largest global source of the drug](#) after Afghanistan. Most of that, too, comes from Shan, which is the largest of Myanmar’s administrative divisions by land size and home to a number of armed ethnic groups fighting their own campaigns for self-determination.

Many of these ethnic militias fund their fight by drug trafficking, working in lockstep with the various criminal syndicates who harvest and produce illicit substances in Shan’s highland areas. In more recent years, these groups have pivoted their operations away from opium to focus more aggressively on meth.

Since 2015, opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar has [declined year after year](#), while production and trafficking of methamphetamine has spiked. Between 2015 and 2019, the number of meth tablets seized by Myanmar authorities [more than doubled](#), then more than tripled again in 2020. Similarly, the amount of crystal meth seized in 2020 saw a 667 percent increase over 2015 levels.

Like the beer bottle haul in Laos, when removed from the bigger picture, these historic seizures might seem to be a win for the narco police. But despite the large and growing amounts of meth getting caught by authorities in Myanmar over the past half-decade, the retail prices of both crystal meth and meth tablets have largely remained stable—indicating minimal changes to their availability on the market.

In some cases, [prices have plummeted](#), indicating a surfeit of supply. So while Burmese narco police might appear to be winning more battles against drug syndicates, they’re demonstrably not winning the war.

Horsey pointed out that Burmese authorities have never been particularly effective at stemming the flow of illicit substances, hampered as they are by a lack of resources, a lack of political will and corrupt authority figures who are often complicit in the drug trade.

Since February's coup, however, enforcement has gone from bad to worse.

"Myanmar's status as one of the world's largest illicit drug producers is only possible because of criminal justice failures," Horsey explained. "Petty and high-level corruption, including in the police force; poor capacity and training; insufficient political priority given to these issues; and the fact that much drug production takes place in areas controlled by armed militias where police operations need Myanmar military approval and support."

Horsey acknowledged the work of upstanding anti-drugs officers responsible for significant seizures of precursor chemicals and drugs within the country, but even these efforts have taken a dive in 2021.

While in previous years Burmese authorities boasted of major drug busts and lab raids within Shan State and beyond, Soe, a Myanmar-based researcher studying drug seizures, told VICE World News that throughout this whole year there has been no reported raid of a major production site or facility anywhere in the country.

"What we [can] conclude about drug seizures going on in the middle of the political crisis in Myanmar [is that] while there are some police there, they are deployed in major cities and other areas to crack down on protesters," said Soe, who has been given a pseudonym to ensure their safety.

"We see less information about ice seizures than 2020—but that doesn't mean that the numbers of drugs produced in Myanmar and trafficking inside Myanmar is in decline. I think the production and trafficking rate is going as usual."

"As usual" means the continuation of an all-time high for producers, traffickers and syndicates in Southeast Asia. The UNODC [in June estimated](#) the value of the region's drug trade to be somewhere between \$30.3 billion and \$61.4 billion—much of which can be traced back to production zones within the Golden Triangle—and syndicates continue to ramp up their operations.

For those based within Myanmar, being able to get drugs across the borders is a big deal. While a gram of crystal meth sells locally for about \$15, the same amount can fetch more than \$100 in countries like Indonesia. If they can get their product out further to somewhere like Japan, one of the world's most lucrative meth markets, traffickers stand to make as much as \$613 per gram.

"The regional market is enormous and can pay, and there is room for growth, while the local market is limited and prices are low," Douglas explained. "Profits are made [by] pumping out product for Asia-Pacific, not the country itself."

The deluge of drugs flowing out of Myanmar also shows no signs of slowing. The global COVID-19 pandemic has done little to dent drug operations in the Triangle, as traffickers have proven resilient and innovative in the face of border closures, flight restrictions and shipping problems. Douglas predicts that once international travel starts up again, syndicates will be ready to take advantage.

Similarly, within the borders of Myanmar—a nation that continues to languish in the throes of violence, conflict and poverty—things look unlikely to improve. The [country's economy has tanked](#) in the wake of the February coup, its currency has depreciated by at least 60 percent, and basic state services have ground to a halt amid increasingly fractious relations between the military and the general populace.

"The Myanmar military has a host of new enemies and no interest in picking fights with the militias involved in the [drug] trade."

While Golden Triangle drug barons seize the moment to consolidate and expand their multinational drug empire, Soe suggested that ongoing economic instability is likely to fuel the drug industry on the domestic front, as more people are forced into illicit lines of work in order to put food on the table.

Experts and international commentators have [long wondered](#) whether Myanmar may be at risk of becoming a narcostate, a country whose official institutions are propped up by the profits of the illegal drug trade. Parts of the country already fit the bill. In 2019, the ICG [observed](#) that Shan State's "Drug production and profits are now so vast that they dwarf the formal sector... and are at the centre of its political economy."

As the nation's licit economy becomes increasingly supplanted by the black market, and the military usurpers allow more space for drug lords within its borders to operate, Myanmar at large has the potential to head down a similar path.

"As the political crisis is going on, that is a very dangerous time for that sort of [drug-producing] situation in Myanmar," Soe told VICE World News. "A lot of people will face some kind of food insecurity and income problems in the next two or three years. And when they have nothing to do, they have to do something so that they can feed their families."

This isn't new. Last time the Burmese army launched a coup d'état, in 1962, the military usurpers pitched the nation into economic freefall in pursuit of the so-called Burmese Way to Socialism. By the 1980s, Myanmar had become one of the [poorest countries in the world](#). And as Chao Tzang Yawngnwe, son of Shan leader and Myanmar's first president Sao Shwe Thaik, explained in a 1982 essay, such poverty only served to oil the wheels of the "fast-rolling opium bandwagon," opening up space for an entrepreneurial black market and "[delivering] the economy into the hands of the opium traffickers."

In this way, Myanmar's drug trafficking problem runs wider and deeper than just a matter of crime. The flourishing drug market is intrinsically rooted in, and draws its lifeblood from, the various political, social and economic catastrophes that continue to plague the Burmese people.

Unless the manifold problems that precipitate and fuel the drug market are resolved, Soe suggested, the high tide of narcotics flowing out of the Golden Triangle will continue to rise. And with the February coup ushering in a new chapter of political upheaval in Myanmar—one with little prospect of resolution—the forecast is looking as auspicious as ever for the country's roaring drug industry.

"Drugs are a byproduct of the political strife and conflict in the country. There is no way to solve the drug issue unless the country finds a political solution to end the decades-old conflicts and improve the governance system," said Soe.

"The country is in the conflict trap."

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HEADLINE	12/19 India: 2 lynchings at Sikh temples
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/world/asia/sikh-temples-lynching.html
GIST	<p>Two people were lynched over the weekend in the northern Indian state of Punjab after they attempted to carry out acts of sacrilege inside Sikh temples, including one at the religion's holiest site, the authorities said.</p> <p>Similar episodes of sacrilege have been reported in recent weeks across Punjab, a Sikh-majority state in India where tensions were already running high amid the backdrop of elections early next year.</p> <p>The first mob attack took place on Saturday when an unidentified man stepped inside the sanctum sanctorum of the Golden Temple, the holiest shrine for Sikhs, in Amritsar.</p>

[Videos of the episode](#), which have circulated widely, showed a man with a yellow cloth tied to his head jumping over a golden railing into the enclosure where the Guru Granth Sahib, the holiest book of Sikhism, is kept.

Witnesses said he picked up a diamond-encrusted sword and tried to hit the holy book, which is considered a sacrilege. Temple caretakers stopped the man, who has not been identified, and were taking him to a manager's office when the mob intercepted them and beat him to death, they said.

On Sunday, another man was beaten to death after devotees said they found him disrespecting the Sikh flag by tearing it apart in the Gurdwara Sahib temple in Kapurthala, another district of Punjab.

Witnesses said the man, who also has not been identified, was taken into custody by the police, as angry Sikhs demanded that he be questioned immediately and in their presence. As tensions rose, they said, the group then overpowered the police and beat the man severely. The police took him to a hospital, where doctors declared him dead.

Gurinder Singh Dhillon, the top police officer in the Jalandhar region, where the temple is, said that when the police caught the man in the Kapurthala district they were overpowered by an angry mob.

"There were no visible signs of sacrilege at the Gurdwara Sahib," Mr. Dhillon said, referring to the Sikh temple. "We have registered a case and are investigating the matter."

After acts of sacrilege in the past, Sikhs have complained that the regional government, led by the Congress party, has failed to address the issue adequately, prosecute those involved or prevent similar episodes.

The regional home minister, Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa, said that a special investigation team would investigate the episode at Amritsar and that a report was expected within two days.

Mr. Randhawa said he had directed the police to strengthen security at all religious sites in the state of Punjab.

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HEADLINE	12/19 Rapper killed at Los Angeles concert
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/arts/music/drakeo-dead-stabbing.html
GIST	<p>Drakeo the Ruler, a West Coast rapper known for his offbeat cadence and jerky rhythm, was fatally stabbed on Saturday night during an altercation at a Los Angeles festival where several artists were scheduled to perform. He was 28.</p> <p>A publicist for the rapper, Scott Jawson, confirmed his death on Sunday.</p> <p>Drakeo the Ruler, whose real name was Darrell Caldwell, was to perform at the festival, Once Upon a Time in L.A., at 8:30 p.m. local time.</p> <p>At about 8:40 p.m., paramedics responded to a call about a stabbing near the Banc of California Stadium in Exposition Park, where the festival was being held, according to the Los Angeles Fire Department.</p> <p>The altercation happened in the "roadway backstage," according to a statement from Once Upon a Time in L.A. Festival organizers ended the show early on Saturday night. Other artists scheduled to perform included 50 Cent and Snoop Dogg.</p> <p>The Los Angeles Police Department is investigating the stabbing. It was unclear on Sunday whether any arrests had been made.</p>

In February, Mr. Caldwell, who has garnered more than 1.5 million monthly listeners on Spotify, released his biggest album to date, “The Truth Hurts,” in which he raps in a nervous-sounding delivery about “everything that I have gone through,” including incarceration, he said in a statement promoting the album earlier this year.

Born in Los Angeles and raised by a single mother, Mr. Caldwell has said in interviews that he spent much of his youth in correctional facilities. He thought of rap as a way to earn money and help his family.

He told [The Ringer](#) in 2020 that his long-term aspirations were to be wealthy and “get my mom and everybody that I can take care of out of poverty.”

“I’ve got to make sure that they’ll never have to want for nothing again,” he said. “I want to show people that no matter how hard the situation is, my story proves that anything is possible.”

Mr. Caldwell pioneered “nervous music,” a subgenre of rap that sounds sinister and contains cryptic lyrics.

In 2020, Mr. Caldwell released “Thank You for Using GTL,” an album that refers to GTL, a communications company used in some correctional facilities.

The album had verses that Mr. Caldwell recorded over a phone while he was still in jail, awaiting trial in connection with the 2016 killing of a 24-year-old man, Mr. Jawson said. Mr. Caldwell was acquitted of felony murder and attempted murder charges in 2019.

Los Angeles County prosecutors tried to retry Mr. Caldwell on conspiracy charges related to the killing, Mr. Jawson said. Mr. Caldwell agreed to a plea deal and was released in November 2020. Mr. Caldwell later insisted that he did not commit a crime related to the case.

A month after being released, Mr. Jawson and Mr. Caldwell met for the first time.

“He was very proud of doing everything on his own, on his own terms,” Mr. Jawson said. “He was an independent artist and took a lot of pride in his ability.”

In the beginning of his career, he financed some of his music videos, uploaded his songs to streaming platforms and organized shows.

It culminated in February when he released, “Talk to Me,” featuring a chorus from Drake, the chart-topping rapper and singer. The song has more than 30 million streams on Spotify.

Mr. Caldwell told [Rolling Stone](#) in March that he wanted people to “take my music seriously and feel everything.”

“I might talk a certain way or say certain things, but I’ve been through a lot in my life,” he said. “I want them to feel what I went through.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 Threat responses left up to schools
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/oxford-high-school-shooting-crime-shootings-education-media-8168c51ce0c47d70b8d5085f4068a1db
GIST	<p>School systems nationwide rely on high-level expertise from the U.S. Secret Service and others as they work to stay vigilant for signs of potential student violence, training staff, surveilling social media and urging others to tip them off.</p> <p>When it comes to how to respond to a possible threat, however, it’s the local educators who make the call.</p>

In the Nov. 30 shooting at an Oxford Township, Michigan high school, authorities say the 15-year-old student charged with killing four peers was allowed to remain in school despite troubling behavior including a drawing of a handgun and a person with bullet wounds. The school's [handling of the student before the shooting is among the topics under investigation](#).

Security experts and school administrators say there is detailed guidance to help schools recognize concerning behavior and when to intervene. But exactly how to respond, including whether to remove students from school property or involve law enforcement, is for school officials to decide in each individual case.

Educators routinely assess how to deal with behavior that can range from mentions of weapons in social media post to students "joking" about bomb threats, all while weighing safety concerns against a student's right to an education.

"There is no such thing as the perfect school safety and crisis response protocol," said Stephen Brock, a lead author on the subjects for the National Association of School Psychologists' curriculum.

Widely accepted best practices for threat assessment have been adapted from Secret Service guidance developed in the years since the 1999 Columbine school massacre. The agency's National Threat Assessment Center recommends multi-disciplinary teams of school administrators, security and mental health professionals be established to assess whether a student would be helped by counseling, should be reported to police, sent back to class or something in between.

To set blanket policy — for example, always sending students home for certain acts — would be to go backward to an era of zero-tolerance policies, when everyone was punished but few students got help, said Lina Alathari, chief of the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center.

"You have to rely on your assessment to guide your response, which is why this multidisciplinary approach is so important. You want the mental health perspective, but you also want the (student resource officer) perspective because they will bring that operational, investigative mindset to ask the questions, whether something is an imminent risk or not," she said.

Michael Lubelfeld, superintendent of North Shore School District 112 in Highland Park, Illinois, described an "all hands on deck" approach whether a report comes in about a scuffle between students or a serious threat.

He recalled a scenario in one of the district's middle schools last year, in which a child was overheard "indicating he wanted to do a violent act." It was close to the end of the day, with little time to investigate. So he summoned police, who arrived in force.

"It was unsubstantiated but we didn't have time to really do a thoughtful investigation," Lubelfeld said, "so we basically called in the cavalry and then informed the community why we did it."

"I would rather overreact," he said, "and I can take the criticism for that."

The Michigan attack came only hours after the defendant, Ethan Crumbley, returned to class after the school summoned him and his parents to discuss worrying behavior, including the drawing with the gun and the words: "The thoughts won't stop. Help me." Ethan told a counselor it was part of a video game he was designing.

After the shooting, authorities learned his father had bought the gun his son used four days before. A prosecutor, [in taking the unusual step of charging the parents with involuntary manslaughter](#), said James and Jennifer Crumbley knew their son had access to the gun but didn't ask him about it after being shown the drawing, and resisted taking him home from school after the meeting. They have pleaded not guilty.

There are legal considerations for schools, especially if a student's behavior is not found to pose an imminent risk, said Melissa Reeves, a psychologist and co-author of the NASP's curriculum.

If parents don't agree with the school and the situation doesn't seem to merit intervention from a social services agency, "our hands are tied because we are legally obligated to educate," she said. "We can't deny access to education."

Districts have faced lawsuits from parents claiming schools [have overreacted and unfairly punished students](#) for harmless remarks or actions or [underreacted to tragic consequences](#).

"You're damned if you do, you're damned if you don't," said Dan Domenech, executive director of the AASA, a national superintendents group. In this third school year disrupted by the pandemic, he said, students are acting out more than ever, further straining the people tasked with figuring out if a student is just blowing off steam or about to erupt.

Meriden, Connecticut Superintendent Mark Benigni said the district has gotten pushback for searching students' bags, sending them home or involving police.

"The last thing I want to do is keep a kid out of school, I know they can't learn when they're not here," he said. "But at the end of the day, my obligation is to make sure I'm creating a safe environment, and I'm not going to apologize when I need to suspend a student."

Near the start of the school year in September, an emailed threat from a high school student circulated among students at Fleming County Schools in Kentucky. The student was expelled after a review by the district's threat assessment team. Superintendent Brian Creasman said the student did not have access to weapons, but the team determined the student needed some kind of help.

"We're going to take as long as we need to make sure we're not putting that student who may have issues back into a classroom who could hurt him or herself or hurt others," Creasman said.

"It's not necessarily about punishing the kid for communicating the threat," he said. "We want to help the kid address what is going on."

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HEADLINE	12/17 From defund to refund: cities in crime surge
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/17/liberal-mayors-reverse-course-defund-police-crime/
GIST	<p>Liberal big-city mayors who raced to jump on the "defund the police" bandwagon are now scrambling to jump off amid signs of a furious voter backlash over rising crime.</p> <p>San Francisco Mayor London Breed became the latest official to execute an abrupt about-face, announcing Tuesday a public-safety initiative that includes emergency police funding after moving last year to cut \$120 million from the law-enforcement budget.</p> <p>"It's time that the reign of criminals who are destroying our city, it is time for it to come to an end," Ms. Breed said at a press conference. "And it comes to an end when we take the steps to be more aggressive with law enforcement, more aggressive with the changes in our policies, and less tolerant of all the bulls—that has destroyed our city."</p> <p>The mayor's tough talk on crime came in sharp contrast to her June 2020 initiative to shift funding from the police department to social services and reduce "over-policing of the Black community."</p> <p>Her U-turn did not go unnoticed by Tony Montoya, San Francisco Police Officers Association president, who called the move to deploy more officers "an acknowledgement that the push to defund the SFPD was a mistake."</p>

A year after the mass Black Lives Matter protests prompted Democrats to take up the “defund the police” mantra, cops are suddenly popular again as major U.S. cities wrestle with the rise of smash-and-grab robberies and notch their highest homicide rates in decades.

“We are getting vertigo with all these changes of hearts from the defunders,” said Tom Saggau, spokesperson for the San Francisco police union.

Democrat-run cities rushing to restore police funding amid crime spikes include Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York City, Seattle, District of Columbia, and Oakland, California, much to the disgust of far-left activists.

The People’s Budget LA, a coalition led by Black Lives Matter-Los Angeles, denounced the Los Angeles City Council after it approved a \$39 million increase for police in June. Last month, the police commission approved a \$213 million raise, a 12% increase from last year.

“This is not a ‘justice budget’ as the mayor calls it. This is yet another police state budget,” said the progressive coalition in a statement.

Jim Pasco, executive director of the National Fraternal Order of Police, said it should come as no surprise to see Democratic mayors reversing themselves on police defunding as public safety moves to the top of the voters’ priority list.

“In many cases for mayors, it’s a question of political survival,” Mr. Pasco told The Washington Times.

Fueling the law-and-order demands are shocking video clips of brazen thefts, including the ransacking last month of a Louis Vuitton store in San Francisco’s Union Square, by seemingly organized mobs of looters.

“Those mayors who’ve allowed a vocal minority to suggest that policing isn’t necessary, or policing is unjust and unfair, who’ve allowed that to become part of the local political consensus, have quickly learned that in a vacuum, without public safety personnel available to address misdeeds, those misdeeds are going to multiply exponentially,” Mr. Pasco said.

A Rasmussen Reports poll released Wednesday found that 89% of likely U.S. voters are concerned about the wave of violent crime, including 69% who are “very” concerned.

That percentage represents a significant increase from July, when 79% said they were concerned, including 49% who were very concerned.

“The polling data reflects that police popularity or public approval has increased dramatically,” Mr. Pasco said. “Those politicians who were less than enthusiastic about supporting the police prior to the times of crisis either have to play catch-up or they fall by the wayside.”

A Pew Research survey released Oct. 26 said that 47% of those polled supported increasing funding for their local police, a jump from 31% in June 2020, while just 15% said law-enforcement budgets should be reduced.

The public-opinion shift has already translated to the ballot box. In Seattle, Republican Ann Davison stunned the Democratic political establishment by winning the city attorney’s race on a law-and-order platform, the first Republican to win a city position in more than a decade.

In Portland, Oregon, the center of Antifa unrest, the city council approved last month an additional \$7 million for public safety, including \$5.2 million for police, a month after surpassing the annual record of 70 homicides set in 1987.

In Minneapolis, voters rejected by 56% to 44% a ballot measure last month that would have replaced the police department with a Department of Public Safety.

Minneapolis bore the brunt of Black Lives Matter protests and rioting following the May 2020 killing of George Floyd by Officer Derek Chauvin. The ex-cop was found guilty of unintentional second-degree murder.

The city council reacted by slashing \$8 million from the police budget. In 2020, violent crime surged in Minnesota, with the state recording 185 homicides, breaking the record of 183 set in 1995, including 82 in Minneapolis, according to the state Department of Public Safety.

Both Minneapolis and St. Paul increased their police budgets this year. Leading the push to recruit police as they left the department in droves was Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey, who confronted the defund-the-police drive when he introduced his budget in August.

“Following the murder of George Floyd, Minneapolis became ground zero in the debate around the future of public safety and a case study in the dangers of grand pronouncements with little planning,” Mr. Frey said.

Not happy with the direction was outgoing city council President Lisa Bender, a pioneer in the movement to enact “alternatives to policing.”

“It seems this budget is intended to send a heartbreaking political message that nothing has changed in Minneapolis since the murder of George Floyd,” Ms. Bender said in a Dec. 10 report on Fox9.

John Pitney, Claremont McKenna College politics professor, chalked up the hairpin reversal to Democratic “damage limitation.”

“Last year, smart Democrats such as Rep James Clyburn (D-SC) immediately recognized the political danger of the ‘defund the police’ slogan,” Mr. Pitney wrote in an email. “But it took time for the realization to sink into the rest of the party. If Democratic mayors can bring down the surge in high-profile crimes, they can take some of the edge off the issue.”

That said, he added that “crime will still be a topic in the 2022 elections, and it still tends to favor the GOP.”

Indeed, the law-and-order issue has been credited in part with the Republican victories in the Nov. 2 off-year election, led by Glenn Youngkin’s unexpected win in the Virginia governor’s race.

Republican National Committee deputy press secretary Will O’Grady said Thursday that “Americans know that Biden and Democrats have failed and our communities across the country are less safe as a result.”

“We’re seeing Democrat mayors who defunded the police decide to reverse their actions as crime rates have skyrocketed because of their failed policies. Republicans will continue to be the party that keeps our communities safe and supports our brave men and women in law enforcement,” he said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi denounced Wednesday the “outrageous” crime surge, saying it “must be stopped,” without mentioning progressive policies such as reducing police budgets and eliminating or reducing cash bail.

“Obviously, it cannot continue. But the fact [is] that there is an attitude of lawlessness in our country that springs from I don’t know where,” Mrs. Pelosi said.

Even with cities moving to refund their police budgets, it may take years or perhaps decades to bring departments back to their pre-2020 status, given the exodus of officers following last year’s protests, said Mr. Pasco.

“Tremendous damage has been done to the law enforcement profession, and it may well take generations to repair all of the damage,” Mr. Pasco said. “Recruiting has become extraordinarily difficult. To find qualified individuals who are willing to become police officers with all of the hardships that accrue to that is becoming extraordinarily difficult.”

In San Francisco, an estimated 250 officers have left in the last two years through retirement, resignations or release, putting the department about 500 officers short of its authorization level.

Recruitment for the San Francisco Police Department has been “abysmal, as it has for most other agencies,” Mr. Saggau said.

“Police academies are slated for 50-55 cadets per academy,” he said. “The 274th slated to graduate in February of 2022 has only 14 and the next one, 275th slated to graduate in June of 2022 has only 19. There is a washout rate of 20-25% after graduation from academy for those that do not make it through field training.”

Other public-safety issues include the advent of progressive prosecutors pushing a social-justice agenda in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and San Francisco.

Ms. Breed took a not-so-veiled swipe at San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin, who faces a recall in June, at this week’s press event.

After praising “the hard work that our police officers and sheriff deputies are putting in,” she put the ball firmly in the DA’s court.

“Now, it’s critical that our entire criminal justice system holds these individuals accountable when arrests are made,” Ms. Breed said. “We need everyone to get on board, not just cops and frontline workers, but prosecutors and the courts as well. Our residents should not see the same criminals back on the streets of the Tenderloin again and again, in an endless cycle of fear and frustration.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 Decriminalizing drugs as overdoses climb
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/some-cities-turn-to-decriminalizing-drugs-as-overdoses-climb-11639839602?mod=hp_listb_pos5
GIST	<p>TORONTO—Canada’s largest city is the latest jurisdiction aiming to decriminalize drug possession as it faces a surging overdose epidemic.</p> <p>Toronto’s board of health this month said it would seek permission from Canada’s federal government to allow drug users to carry small amounts of drugs for personal use, including heroin, fentanyl and cocaine, without fear of prosecution. The exemption wouldn’t cover drug trafficking, which would remain a criminal offense.</p> <p>City officials hope that decriminalization will make it easier for people to get help. They say it could also make it easier for drug users to get jobs and stable housing because they won’t have criminal records.</p> <p>Toronto’s efforts follow those of Vancouver, which filed for a similar exemption in May, and those of the province of British Columbia, which filed its own application for decriminalization in November. Last year, Oregon approved a plan to decriminalize drug possession, while New York City last month became the first city in the U.S. to open supervised injection sites.</p> <p>A similar decriminalization proposal was made by lawmakers in Maine, although the state Senate defeated a bill passed by the state’s House of Representatives.</p>

The new policies and proposals come as officials say they are seeking ways of handling [an overdose epidemic](#) that has swept across North America. Drug users [are dying in record numbers](#) as an increasingly toxic drug supply overwhelms the black market.

“The current approaches to drug policy and regulation are not working,” said Dr. Eileen de Villa, medical officer for Toronto, during a presentation to the city’s board of health on Dec. 6.

In the U.S., provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that [more than 100,000 people](#) are expected to have died from drug overdoses in the 12 months ended April 30, 2021, the first time deaths have crossed that threshold.

In Canada, which has one-ninth of the U.S.’s population, 6,265 people died from opioid overdoses last year. Another 1,772 people died in the first three months of this year, on pace to surpass last year’s tally.

According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, drug arrests and convictions have dropped in Oregon since February. Property crimes, often related to drug use, have also fallen this year.

New York hasn’t decriminalized possession, but drug users can now go to two locations in Upper Manhattan and use drugs under supervision, so they can be treated if they overdose. Such facilities have been available in Vancouver since 2003 and in Toronto since 2017.

According to Toronto city statistics, 531 people died from opioid overdoses in 2020, the most in a single year. The number represented an 81% increase from 2019. As of June this year, 282 people died, on pace to set a record.

In Vancouver, 414 people died from drug overdoses last year. Another 355 died between January and September this year. As overdoses increased, British Columbia introduced a policy to prescribe [pharmaceutical versions of opioids to users](#).

Toronto officials expect to file an application with the federal health department by the end of this year. City officials then expect to create a detailed plan for how decriminalization would work, including specifying the amount of drugs people could legally carry and consume for personal use, and what services would be provided to help users.

Criminalizing drug use is expensive and the returns don’t justify the cost, Dr. de Villa said. In the Canadian province of Ontario, where Toronto is located, local governments spent \$3.7 billion Canadian dollars, the equivalent of almost \$3 billion, in 2017 to enforce drug laws, but overdose deaths have continued to increase.

Joe Cressy, a Toronto city councilor and chair of the city’s board of health, said in an interview that clinical evidence supports the idea that drug use should be treated as a health issue and not as a criminal act.

Though the timeline for approval from the Canadian federal government is unclear, Mr. Cressy said he has been encouraged by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s willingness to deal with the problem.

Mr. Trudeau in October named a new minister of mental health and addictions, and Mr. Cressy said the step suggested that the federal government is serious about the issue.

Decriminalization will allow those suffering from addiction to more easily get access to health services. Mr. Cressy said that just removing criminal penalties alone won’t stop the overdoses. The city is also calling for more funding for addiction treatment and overdose prevention services.

“The trick is to have a system with supports in place,” he said.

	Mr. Trudeau, for his part, said during a recent television interview that his government is open to the idea of decriminalizing drugs, although he didn't commit to taking the step.
	"We are looking where to do that, if to do that, how to do that, in partnership with the provinces," he said.
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HEADLINE	12/19 Indianapolis \$45M in grass-roots programs
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/19/us/indianapolis-murders.html
GIST	<p>INDIANAPOLIS — Shantone Hopkins was sitting outside a doctor's office last year, feeling the sharp pain from the bullet wound that had severed an artery in her left leg and brimming with anger at the former partner who she said had shot her in a domestic dispute.</p> <p>As she waited for treatment, Ms. Hopkins recalled, the desire for some form of revenge against her girlfriend of six years lurked in her thoughts. "I thought about violence," she said in an interview. "I had just been shot, so who doesn't think about that?"</p> <p>That is when she was approached by Iwandra Garner from Eskenazi Health, a public hospital network that treats patients from Indianapolis and the surrounding Marion County. Victim advocates like Ms. Garner seek to lower the number of shootings and stabbings by counseling against impulsive retaliation. Eventually, Ms. Garner persuaded Ms. Hopkins to participate in the program, which also offered aid for housing, food and other essential needs.</p> <p>"They helped me to not go deeper into my dark place," said Ms. Hopkins, 31, who now limps and marked her shooting by having the date, 01-19-20, tattooed on her left hand above a small purple heart.</p> <p>Indianapolis and other cities, where leaders are struggling to find ways to stem a two-year surge in homicides, are subsidizing small, grass-roots programs like Ms. Garner's in an effort to prevent more violence. Such groups focus on reducing all violence, though homicides have become the priority given the escalating numbers. The impact of those programs still is not clear, but the size of Indianapolis's investment — some \$45 million over the next three years — speaks to the urgency of the moment.</p> <p>Indianapolis is one of at least 12 cities that have experienced a record number of homicides this year, along with Philadelphia; Louisville, Ky.; Albuquerque, N.M.; and Portland, Ore. By early December, more than 250 people had been killed in Indianapolis, outpacing the record 215 dead last year, according to the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department.</p> <p>The city's efforts to decrease the grim toll — gunfire has wounded at least 700 people this year — have included pouring millions of dollars over the past few years into about 30 community groups working to diminish violent crime. The city government plans to use federal Covid relief dollars to boost the allocation considerably to \$15 million annually, up from \$3 million.</p> <p>Criminologists say that similar efforts in the 1990s, in which officials in various cities, the police and community groups worked together, led to a drop in violence in that decade. Paul Sharkey, a sociology professor at Princeton University, published a study in 2017 that indicated that in any city with 100,000 people, there was a 9 percent decrease in the murder rate for every 10 nonprofits that organized to address violence locally. But cities rarely give such organizations the money they need to endure, he said.</p> <p>Indianapolis is committing \$150 million to public safety from the \$419 million that it received under the federal American Rescue Plan. Aside from \$45 million for community organizations, other measures include hiring 100 new police officers.</p> <p>At Eskenazi Health, the Prescription for Hope program works with gunshot victims ages 15 to 30. Among roughly 600 shooting or stabbing victims brought to the hospital annually, about 100 agree to participate, hospital officials said.</p>

The program aims to help victims or perpetrators extricate themselves from the cycle of violence, said Dr. Lisa Harris, the chief executive at Eskenazi Health. “We view violence as one more of those chronic conditions that overburden the population that we serve,” she said.

Before the hospital started the program, about 35 percent of the gunshot victims returned within two years with another violent injury, she said, but that number has dropped to 5 percent.

Ms. Hopkins said that the Prescription for Hope program changed her life by introducing her to other victims who were able to remove themselves from those situations after talking about it. She said she saw what happened when the cycle continued. “All you see is people dying, all you see is violence, all you see is crazy stuff,” she said of her everyday life. Rather than her thinking about revenge, the program helps her to seek redress through the courts.

Some critics question the continued funding, however, given the sharp rise in the number of murders.

“People in the city are looking at the situation and saying, ‘We have been funding these types of programs for several years now — what difference has really been made?’” said Paul M. Annee, a Republican member of the City-County Council.

Eric Grommer, a criminologist at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis, said that despite some preliminary indications that the programs had an impact, there was not enough data to conclude they were effective.

Indianapolis officials are convinced that even a glimmer of change makes the programs worthwhile. “This is not a magic wand that we are going to give this money and aha, there are no more homicides,” said Lauren Rodriguez, director of the city’s Office of Public Health and Safety. Homicides dipped in 2019, the first year after Indianapolis inaugurated its series of programs, which indicated that the city was on the right track, she said.

Although there is no one explanation for the rise in murders, the mental and financial strains brought on by Covid-19 are among possible causes, with the pandemic also interrupting many outreach efforts to reduce violence.

In addition to the Eskenazi program, Indianapolis has turned to numerous other nonprofits for assistance. The National Institute for Criminal Justice Reform helped create the blueprint for wider grass-roots involvement, including training 50 “interrupters” who can intervene and counsel anyone involved in a recent incident.

A study by the institute showed that like in many cities, a relatively small number of people foment most of the shootings — in a population of 850,000 people, just 400 people were connected with 70 percent of the incidents in Indianapolis. And those individuals are more likely to trust someone from their own neighborhood, especially those who have pulled themselves out of a violent past, the study showed, rather than the police or any government official.

Murders in Indianapolis are particularly pronounced in the poorer neighborhoods in the east. The Rev. David Greene Sr. of the Purpose of Life Ministries, a 1,000-member church, sought help from Eskenazi Health to train 10 congregants as mental health counselors. “With these people dealing with the trauma that’s in their life, with the grief that’s in their life, just trying to find meaning and trying to move forward can be challenging,” he said.

Gunfire is common enough in eastern and other neighborhoods to have become background noise. Countless lamp posts and utility poles are festooned with thickets of teddy bears, roadside memorials to the dead. The stuffed animals remain there for years, growing soggy and deformed under the elements.

Another nonprofit group working with the city, Eclectic Soul Voices Corporation, mentors teenagers referred by the courts for repeated gun violations.

Austin Juarez, 18, was 8 when he saw his first shooting victim, a man left lying on the ground bleeding in the middle of his neighborhood playground. He was 13 when he acquired his first gun, and in subsequent years, he was charged three times with illegal possession of a firearm.

More than 10 friends have been shot dead.

“You go numb,” he said. “I don’t have any emotion toward it. If somebody dies, I pay them my respects and that is it. I can’t cry about it.” He added, “It has just happened so much.”

Aaron Green, the street outreach coordinator for the program, coached Mr. Juarez through finishing his high school equivalency exams and nourishes his dreams of opening a Mexican restaurant. He does not try to dissuade those he mentors from carrying guns but to follow the law and to think differently, to avoid being impulsive, to walk away.

“The day that I tell one of these kids to stop carrying a gun could be the last day that I see him,” said Mr. Green, who was 17 when his own father was fatally shot by a teenager in a drug deal.

Not every case is a success. This past summer, one of Mr. Green’s brightest teenagers, whom he described as a little brother, was arrested on murder charges.

Yet he persists. “If we can help with them making one good decision over making another bad one, we have got to count the wins.”

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HEADLINE	12/18 German court: Russia orchestrated murder
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/world/europe/germany-russia-berlin-murder.html
GIST	<p>BERLIN — A German court ruled on Wednesday that the Russian state had orchestrated the murder of a Chechen former separatist fighter in a Berlin park in the summer of 2019 and sentenced the Russian citizen convicted of pulling the trigger to life in prison.</p> <p>Though the German authorities had previously concluded that the Russian intelligence services were probably involved in the killing, the murder trial in Berlin was a rare instance in which the covert actions of the Russian government to eliminate an enemy on foreign territory were held up to judicial scrutiny.</p> <p>The new German government wasted little time in responding. Shortly after the verdict was announced, the German Foreign Ministry told Russia’s ambassador that it would be expelling two Russian diplomats, reprising the heightened tensions after the killing that had led to expulsions on both sides.</p> <p>“This murder on state orders — as determined by the court today — constitutes a serious violation of German law and Germany’s sovereignty,” the foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, said in a statement.</p> <p>The convicted man, identified by the German authorities as Vadim N. Krasikov, 55, maintained before and during the trial that he had no links to the Russian state, but German officials said that he was an employee of Russia’s domestic spy service, known by its initials, F.S.B.</p> <p>The victim was a 40-year-old refugee named Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, known by the alias Tornike K. in German court documents, who was a Chechen former separatist commander who fought against Russian forces in the early 2000s and was labeled a terrorist by Russian state media.</p> <p>In reading the sentence, the judges of the Berlin High Court convicted Mr. Krasikov of murder, along with illegally owning a gun. The judges found the Russian to be “heavily guilty,” an unusual ruling that makes a shortened sentence or parole less likely.</p>

Mr. Krasikov “had been part of the state security apparatus and had received an order from a state agency within the government of the Russian Federation to liquidate,” said Lisa Jani, a spokeswoman for the court.

The Russian Embassy in Berlin wrote [in a statement on Twitter](#) that the accusations of Russian involvement were “absurd” and not substantiated by evidence.

Mr. Krasikov, who called himself Vadim A. Sokolov and had a Russian passport in that name, was arrested after two witnesses saw him throwing his bike and a bag into the Spree River after shooting the victim at least twice. Police divers later found a Glock 26 pistol in the river in the park, a little over a mile away from the chancellor’s office.

The verdict came on the same day that Chancellor [Olaf Scholz](#), who was [sworn in as Germany’s new leader](#) last week, delivered his first speech to Parliament. In his address, he warned that Russia would pay a “high price” for any “violation of territorial integrity,” although he did not mention the killing or the verdict.

As Russian troops [assemble close to the border of Ukraine](#), dealing with Moscow is one of the new government’s first major foreign policy tests. The sentence handed down in Berlin is expected to make relations even more difficult.

Still, Mr. Scholz’ Social Democrats are expected to take a more tolerant approach in the relationship with the Russian government than Ms. Merkel’s conservative Christian Democrats did.

“We are ready for constructive dialogue,” Mr. Scholz said in his speech to Parliament. “Against the background of our history, this must apply to our country in particular in its relations with Russia.”

In making its decision, the court not only convicted Mr. Krasikov but also backed an assertion by Germany’s federal prosecutor that the killing was carried out with the Russian government’s involvement.

“There are sufficient, real indications that the killing of Tornike K. was carried out either on orders by the officials in the Russian Federation or those in the autonomous Chechen Republic, as part of the Russian Republic,” the prosecutor said in 2019 when taking over the case from the local authorities.

Western intelligence agencies have long assessed that the Russian spy services under President Vladimir V. Putin employ assassination as a tool for settling scores with those the Kremlin considers to be enemies of the state.

A year before Mr. Khangoshvili was murdered, two operatives from Russia’s military intelligence service traveled to Britain, where they smeared a highly potent Soviet-designed nerve agent, called Novichok, on the front door of a home belonging to [Sergei V. Skripal, a former Russian military intelligence officer](#) who spied for the British in the 1990s.

Mr. Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, fell severely ill, but survived, as did a police detective who responded to their home and [a British man](#) who picked up a perfume dispenser the Russian officers had used to transport the poison. The man’s girlfriend, [Dawn Sturgess, later died](#) when she sprayed the perfume bottle’s contents on her skin.

Western intelligence agencies later determined that the assassination had been orchestrated by a specialized group of officers within the military intelligence service, [known as Unit 29155](#), but the murder of Mr. Khangoshvili was attributed to a different agency, the F.S.B.

The F.S.B. is mostly responsible for operations inside Russia. According to findings by the open-source investigative group Bellingcat, backed up by several Western intelligence agencies, it was this agency that was responsible for [the poisoning of Mr. Putin’s most prominent political opponent, Aleksei A. Navalny](#), in Siberia last year.

	<p>But Western security officials have grown increasingly concerned about the F.S.B.'s activities outside Russia.</p> <p>The German authorities initially had difficulty learning anything about the man they had arrested in connection with the murder. Mr. Krasikov traveled using a real Russian passport, but with a fake name, and Russian officials refused to provide German investigators with any information that might help them. When asked about the case at a summit in Paris a few months after the murder, Mr. Putin described Mr. Khangoshvili as "a cruel and bloodthirsty person."</p> <p>On Wednesday, as Mr. Navalny's daughter Daria Navalnaya accepted the Sakharov Prize, the European Union's top human-rights award, in her father's name, she reminded the attendees of Russia's alleged extraterritorial killings, noting the murder in Berlin and the Skripal case in Britain.</p> <p>"We already know that a real terrorist group has been created inside of Putin's special services, killing citizens of my country without a hearing or a trial, without justice," she told assembled members of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, urging them to take a harder line against the Russian leader.</p> <p>"They were close to killing my mother, they nearly killed my father, and no one will guarantee that tomorrow European politicians won't start falling dead by simply touching a doorknob."</p>
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HEADLINE	12/18 Japan police: arson suspect identified
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/world/asia/japan-fire-osaka-arson.html
GIST	<p>TOKYO — Surveillance footage showed the man entering a psychiatric clinic in a busy office building in Osaka, Japan's third-largest city, and setting two large paper bags on the floor of the waiting area.</p> <p>Within an instant, a fire ignited, ripping through the 270-square-foot clinic on Friday morning. By the time firefighters brought it under control, less than 30 minutes later, 28 people had been taken to a hospital. By the afternoon, 24 were confirmed to be dead.</p> <p>On Sunday, the police put a name to the man, who they said was being investigated on suspicion of arson and murder. The suspect, Morio Tanimoto, 61, is in critical condition and has not been arrested, the police said. Two other survivors of the fire were also in critical condition on Sunday.</p> <p>The fire, in a crowded district just steps from Osaka's largest train station, rattled a country well known for its sense of security. It came just six weeks after another violent attack, in which the police said a man dressed as the Joker wounded 17 people with a knife on a Tokyo train and tried to set a fire onboard.</p> <p>Last month, another man was arrested and charged with arson after a fire was set on a bullet train in Kyushu, in southern Japan.</p> <p>According to the police in Osaka, street surveillance cameras captured footage of Mr. Tanimoto on a bicycle as he left his home less than three miles from the clinic, carrying two paper bags.</p> <p>On Saturday, as rumors of the suspect's identity emerged, journalists flocked to Nishiyodogawa, the neighborhood of nondescript beige and cream houses where Mr. Tanimoto lived.</p> <p>Takehiro Kyoraku, an official in the investigation division of the Osaka prefectural police, said a small fire had occurred on the morning of the lethal fire at a home in Nishiyodogawa, though he would not confirm that it was Mr. Tanimoto's residence. In the home, the police found a document indicating a relationship with the psychiatric clinic.</p>

The fire raised questions about structural safety. The clinic, which specialized in internal medicine and psychiatry, was housed on the fourth floor of a narrow, eight-story building erected in 1970, which had just one stairwell. Fire safety experts say buildings should have at least two exits.

Over the weekend, according to NHK, Japan's public broadcaster, the fire department in Osaka started urgent on-site inspections of buildings with only one set of stairs, identifying close to 5,500 such structures in the city of nearly 2.7 million. Fire officials were checking to make sure those exits were not blocked.

Two years ago, another arson fire at an anime studio in Kyoto, not far from Osaka, [killed 33 people](#) and injured dozens in one of Japan's worst mass killings in decades. In that case, fire experts identified numerous problems with the building, which also had just one main stairwell and lacked fireproofing on interior fixtures.

Such incidents disrupt a fundamental sense of security in Japan, where crime is relatively scarce and the murder rate is among the lowest in the world.

"In Japan there is a myth of safety," said Yasuyuki Deguchi, a criminal psychologist at Tokyo Mirai University.

"Stopping these crimes is very, very difficult," he added. "Most of these crimes occur without any warning. You cannot even guess that they are thinking about arson."

Experts in arson say it is a public health issue, with many perpetrators showing signs of mental illness. Theresa A. Gannon, a professor of forensic psychology at the University of Kent in England, said that arsonists were often antisocial or had trouble forming intimate relationships, and that they used fire-setting as a coping mechanism or to get attention.

Ms. Gannon and a team at the University of Kent have developed a training program for mental health professionals to treat people who have a record of setting fires. She said that the team had trained professionals in the United States, Australia, Canada and Singapore and that a manual was available in Japanese.

Last year in Japan, there were nearly 2,500 incidents of arson, which killed 236 people, according to the Fire and Disaster Management Agency.

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HEADLINE	12/17 Calif. governor boost to combat retail theft
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/california-governor-boosts-efforts-to-combat-smash-and-grabs/
GIST	<p>SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Stung by recent headline-grabbing smash-and-grab robberies, California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday said he will seek more than \$300 million in state funding over three years to boost law enforcement efforts to combat retail theft.</p> <p>"The issue of crime and violence is top of mind all throughout not only the state of California but across the United States, highlighted recently by some high-profile retail theft operations," Newsom said.</p> <p>He added that "these organized retail mobs ... (have) a profound impact on our feelings of safety here in this state, this region and as I note, this country."</p> <p>Newsom proposed giving \$255 million in grants to local law enforcement agencies to put more police at stores to deter organized retail crime over the next three years.</p> <p>An additional \$30 million over three years in the proposed budget he sends to lawmakers next month would go to county district attorneys to support prosecutions of retail and auto theft-related crimes.</p>

Another \$18 million over three years would go to create a new “organized theft special unit” under the state attorney general, with investigators and prosecutors dedicated to pursuing organized crime ringleaders.

Retailers in California and in cities elsewhere around the U.S., including Chicago and Minneapolis, have recently been victimized by large-scale thefts when groups of people show up in groups for mass shoplifting events or to enter stores and smash and grab from display cases.

Solo shoplifters and retail thieves have also been a growing problem for California retailers, who have said the criminals face little if any consequences after they are caught.

Earlier this month, Newsom criticized local prosecutors for not doing enough to crack down on the criminals by using existing state laws.

He defended a voter-approved 2014 initiative that reduced certain thefts from felonies to misdemeanors, though prosecutors said it left them without enough legal tools.

Newsom on Friday proposed another \$20 million to aid small businesses victimized by smash-and-grab robberies.

He also plans to turn an existing retail theft task force into a permanent “smash and grab enforcement unit.”

Working under the task force, California Highway Patrol “enforcement fleets” would coordinate with local law enforcement departments to target organized retail and auto theft in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, San Joaquin Valley, Los Angeles and San Diego regions.

Auto thefts had become a particularly perplexing problem in the Bay Area, driving tourists away from some high crime areas.

Newsom said he will also work with state lawmakers to improve highway camera technology to help solve crimes, and correspondingly boost highway patrols “based on real-time data.”

He emphasized that long-term crime rates in California have come down, but said California and other U.S. states have experienced a recent upswing in organized retail theft and violent crimes, including those involving firearms.

Homicides in California jumped 31% last year, while politically progressive Oakland recently reversed course on police defunding due to a surge in homicides and gun violence. And on Friday, San Francisco Mayor London Breed declared a state of emergency to confront crime in one of the city’s poorest and most drug-infested neighborhoods.

Former governor Jerry Brown, a fellow Democrat who championed easing lengthy criminal punishments, said in a television interview that there needs to be a carrot-and-stick approach that includes some punishment for lower level crimes.

Newsom proposed what he called the “largest gun buyback program in America” — \$25 million for matching grants to local law enforcement agencies to collect guns and increase awareness of gun violence.

He also promised more but unspecified additional funding for California’s Violence Prevention Research Program at the University of California, Davis.

He reiterated the plan he announced last weekend to allow private citizens to sue those who make, sell or distribute illegal assault weapons and untraceable “ghost guns,” ghost gun kits or parts. Texas uses a similar method to try to restrict abortions.

“If a law (in Texas) is going to be used to put women’s lives at risk, we will use that law to protect people’s lives,” Newsom said.

Finally, Newsom proposed \$20 million to support efforts by the California National Guard to fight the importation of illegal drugs — particularly fentanyl flowing into the state from Mexico — by targeting transnational criminal organizations.

The proposal to combat retail theft was hailed by the leaders of the California Retailers Association and California Chamber of Commerce.

“Californians have had enough,” said Jennifer Barrera, chamber president and CEO.

Newsom was joined by Alameda County District Attorney Nancy O’Malley — who warned that retail thieves “are terrorizing our communities” — and by Attorney General Rob Bonta, who was appointed by Newsom to the post to fill a vacancy.

Both Newsom and Bonta are Democrats seeking re-election next year and Republicans already are making crime a campaign issue.

Newsom earlier this week pledged that his January budget will propose at least \$100 million in local grants to remove garbage and beautify public spaces associated with homelessness, another important campaign theme.

The proposed spending to combat crime and to clean up neighborhoods represent fractions of the state’s annual operating budget, which this year exceeds \$260 billion and is projected to have at least a \$31 billion surplus next year.

Senate Republican Leader Scott Wilk said Democrats “are finally waking up” to “soft-on-crime policies” that he said have “turned this once-majestic state into a sanctuary for criminals.”

While opponents believe Democrats are vulnerable on the issues, Newsom in September easily prevailed over an effort to recall him in midterm.

Rescue California, one of the groups the promoted the failed recall, on Thursday called on Newsom to call a special legislative session to target smash-and-grab thefts that the group said are “plaguing California.” Members also urged Newsom to support rescinding the 2014 ballot measure that eased criminal penalties for theft and drug crimes.

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HEADLINE	12/17 San Francisco mayor: state of emergency
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/17/us/san-francisco-state-of-emergency-crime.html
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO — The mayor of San Francisco on Friday made a sharp break with the liberal conventions that have guided her city for decades, declaring a state of emergency in one of its most crime-infested neighborhoods.</p> <p>Mayor London Breed’s announcement came just days after she emphasized the need for the police to clean up what she has described as “nasty streets.” At a news conference at City Hall, steps away from where drug dealers openly peddle fentanyl and methamphetamines, she said, “We are in a crisis and we need to respond accordingly.” She added, “Too many people are dying in this city, too many people are sprawled on our streets.”</p> <p>The neighborhood, the Tenderloin, has been ground zero for drug dealing, overdose deaths and homelessness for years. But Ms. Breed said in an interview that she reached her “breaking point” in recent weeks after meeting with families with children who live in the Tenderloin and said they felt constantly threatened.</p>

Her actions and startlingly blunt language were a marked change in tone and policy in a city that has been polarized over homeless encampments and open-air drug use. Elected as a liberal Democrat, she spoke this week about “a reign of criminals,” trash strewn across neighborhoods full of “feces and urine,” and shoplifting at high-end stores that she called “mass looting events.”

Joe D’Alessandro, president and chief executive of the San Francisco tourism bureau, said the city had an image problem and praised the mayor for addressing it.

“We are excited and enthusiastic to see some significant steps to make San Francisco a safer city,” he said. “People are just fed up with some of the stuff they’ve seen and want to see some action.”

The announcement of a state of emergency specifically targeted the drug overdose crisis: [More than twice as many people died of drug overdoses](#) in San Francisco last year as died from the coronavirus. But Friday’s announcement is part of a broader, aggressive push to crack down on drug dealing and improve conditions. In practical terms, Ms. Breed said the city would no longer tolerate illicit drug users in the streets — giving them a choice between treatment or arrest.

Earlier this week, Ms. Breed acknowledged that many of her progressive constituents would push back on her efforts, but she said, “We can’t keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result.” She said San Francisco was a compassionate place, one that prided itself on second chances. “But we are not a city where anything goes,” she said.

The conditions in San Francisco have been fodder nationally for Fox News and other conservative outlets as signs of disarray supposedly created by liberal governance. In San Francisco, opponents of the district attorney, Chesa Boudin, have tried to leverage a perception of disorder and high-profile incidents of retail theft to further a recall effort. This week, Ms. Breed used more strident language than even her city’s harshest critics.

Her announcement came as mayors across the country are grappling with a rise in gun violence, homicides and overdose deaths.

Ms. Breed detailed a [list of initiatives](#) intended to disrupt street sales of stolen goods, expand police surveillance powers and pressure those who use drugs into treatment. Ms. Breed said that declaring a state of emergency would cut through red tape and increase funding to the police, who she said had already started arresting “people who have been holding this neighborhood hostage” during felony warrant sweeps.

Some who work in the Tenderloin said they were heartened by Ms. Breed’s announcement.

A block away from a deserted playground, Hanh Huynh, 33, said that the Vietnamese grocery store where she works was frequently robbed, and that she had recently moved because she worried about raising her 2-year-old in the area. Ali Baalouach, 44, said homeless people often stole the food he sold at his father’s halal grocery store. “I love the mayor,” he said. “Listen to her, follow the rules and do what you have to do.”

Fatou Sadio, 37, who lives two blocks from the Tenderloin and frequently shops in the area, said she was happy about the crackdown on drugs and homelessness. “You step out of your door and you have to be careful,” she said, “because somebody’s sleeping there, using needles, pooping there.”

But not everyone welcomed the news from the mayor.

“It is absolutely clear to everyone who lives or works in the Tenderloin that we need to be doing more,” said Laura Thomas, the director of Harm Reduction Policy for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, adding that increased criminalization and coerced treatment do not work. “We don’t have enough services, we don’t have enough housing, we don’t have enough shelter beds.”

Ms. Thomas said the city should put its energy into rolling out existing initiatives, like one that would expand [mental health care](#), and developing supervised injection sites, which reduce overdose deaths. The mayor also promised to address quality-of-life issues by repairing broken streetlights and removing trash and human waste.

The Declaration of Emergency must be ratified by the city's Board of Supervisors within the next seven days, and would remain in effect for no longer than 90 days.

[Crime statistics](#) provided by the San Francisco Police Department show that several categories of crime are down since 2019, the last year before the pandemic, though homicides have increased to 53 this year from 37 in 2019, in keeping with a national increase.

There have been almost 29,000 reports of larceny in San Francisco this year, an increase over last year but well below the nearly 40,000 larcenies reported in the same period of 2019.

Burglaries were up sharply in 2020 but have declined slightly this year; motor vehicle thefts also spiked in 2020 and have stayed about the same this year. Retail theft is more difficult to track because it is made up of several different crimes, but local news reports have said that San Francisco has consistently been one of the [top 10 cities for retail theft nationwide](#), and suggested that the retail industry has exaggerated the financial impact.

Public perception of crime is often at odds with reality, but it can and does shape policy.

In an interview at City Hall after her news conference on Friday, Ms. Breed brushed aside critics who say that the statistics do not show a crime wave in San Francisco.

"The data doesn't matter when somebody randomly walks up to you who is on crystal meth and socks you in the face and puts you in the hospital," she said. "The data doesn't matter when you are here in San Francisco on vacation and all your belongings were stolen because someone broke into a car right in front of you."

"At the end of the day people have to feel safe in this city," she said.

Blocks away from the mayor's announcement, dozens sat out on the streets or in tents, bundled up against the cold. Workers in the Tenderloin say that it is a daily occurrence for homeless people to shoot up, leave human feces on the street and scream and yell at odd hours.

"It's a huge challenge," said Robin Bell, the lead administrator at an affordable housing complex next to a syringe access service. "It's sad, so many homeless and mental health issues that need to be addressed."

Ms. Bell, 58, said the constant chaos made her afraid to go outside. She has instead been taking lunch breaks at her desk for more than a year.

Some of the homeless people living in the Tenderloin disregarded the mayor's announcement. "It's grandstanding," said Tom O'Doherty, 48, who said he was homeless and living on nearby Treasure Island but often came to the Tenderloin to hang out with friends. Mr. O'Doherty and his friends were fixing up their bicycles and playing music near their friend's tent, while a few others nearby smoked methamphetamine.

He said the spot on the street was like the bar from "Cheers," with regulars coming and going. His friend, Jeff Crowell, 65, downplayed the crime and said it was minor compared with cities like Chicago or Atlanta. And Mr. O'Doherty said that whenever the police came into an area and swept out the homeless people and drugs, they simply moved a few blocks away.

"It's like playing Whac-a-Mole," he said.

HEADLINE	12/18 Longest sentence yet Capitol rioter: 63mo.
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/nation-politics/college-student-sentenced-to-1-month-for-capitol-riot-role/
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — A Capitol rioter who attacked police officers working to hold back the angry pro-Trump mob on Jan. 6 was sentenced Friday to more than five years behind bars, the most so far for anyone sentenced in the insurrection.</p> <p>Robert Palmer, 54, of Largo, Florida, wept as he told U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan that he recently watched a video of his actions that day and could not believe what he was seeing.</p> <p>“Your honor. I’m really really ashamed of what I did,” he said through tears.</p> <p>Palmer was one of several rioters sentenced on Friday in District of Columbia court for their actions that day, when the angry mob descended to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden’s victory following a rally by then-President Donald Trump. Scores of police were beaten and bloodied, five people died and there was about \$1.5 million in damage done to the U.S. Capitol. Palmer is the 65th defendant to be sentenced overall. More than 700 people have been charged.</p> <p>A college student who posted online that “Infamy is just as good as fame” after she climbed through a broken window at Capitol was sentenced to a month in jail for her actions. Gracyn Courtright, 23, of Hurricane, West Virginia, didn’t injure anyone, though, and her sentence reflected that.</p> <p>But Palmer made his way to the front line during the chaos and started to attack, throwing a wooden plank, spraying a fire extinguisher, then hurling it when it was done. He rooted around for other objects, prosecutors said. He was briefly pepper-sprayed by police before he attacked officers again with a pole. He pleaded guilty to attacking officers.</p> <p>Palmer said in a handwritten letter to the judge that he felt betrayed by Trump and his allies who fed them conspiracy theories.</p> <p>“Trump supporters were lied to by those at the time who had great power,” he wrote. “They kept spitting out the false narrative about a stolen election and how it was ‘our duty’ to stand up to tyranny.”</p> <p>Palmer, who has been held at the D.C. jail among fetid conditions that prompted a review by authorities, said it wasn’t fair that he be punished so severely when the ringleaders aren’t even behind bars.</p> <p>The judge agreed — to a point. “It is true that the people who extorted you and encouraged you and rallied you to go and take action have not been charged,” she said. “That is not the court’s decision. I have my opinions but they are not relevant.”</p> <p>Before Palmer’s sentencing of 63 months, the longest prison term handed down for a Capitol rioter was 41 months. That was the sentence received by both Jacob Chansley, the Arizona man who wore a horned fur hat, bare chest and face paint inside the Capitol; and New Jersey gym owner Scott Fairlamb, the first person to be sentenced for assaulting a law enforcement officer during the riot.</p> <p>“It has to be made clear ... trying to stop the peaceful transition of power and assaulting law enforcement officers is going to be met with certain punishment,” the judge said. “There are going to be consequences. I’m not making an example of you. I’m sentencing you for the conduct you did.”</p> <p>Courtright, 23, of Hurricane, West Virginia, sobbed as she told U.S. District Court Judge Christopher Cooper that “if I could take back anything in my life it would be my actions on Jan. 6.”</p>

She posted photos of herself online — like scores of other rioters — reveling in the moment. “Can’t wait to tell my grandkids I was here!” she wrote, and inside the Senate chamber, she was photographed holding a “Members only” sign.

“I will never be the same girl again,” the University of Kentucky student said through tears. “This has changed me completely.”

After the riot, she dug in on social media when she was criticized for her actions, before eventually deleting her accounts. Courtright is among the youngest of those charged in the Capitol riot so far.

Her attorney on Friday argued she had no idea what she was doing and that she wasn’t a political activist — she didn’t even vote in the election she was there to protest. The judge seized on that during his remarks.

“That is your choice obviously, but in my view — if any citizen wants to participate in our democracy, casting a vote is the price of admission,” he said. “Because when you do that, you have to study the issues and the candidates, learn what their policies are, figure out how those policies are affecting your community.”

Participating in a democracy isn’t like going to a University of Kentucky game and “rooting for a team just because of the color of their jerseys,” the judge said. “It’s certainly not resorting to violence when your team doesn’t win the game,” he told Courtright.

Cooper also noted that Courtright made it to the floor of the U.S. Senate at about the exact time that Ashli Babbitt, on the House, side was shot dead.

“Do you know how many people died on Jan. 6, 5. Including Ms. Babbitt?” he asked. “Five.”

“Do you know how many Capitol police officers committed suicide after Jan. 6, harmed from the trauma of that day? Four,” the judge added. “So was it cool to have been there?”

“No,” she answered emphatically.

Still, the judge said the recommended six months in prison was too high and sentenced her instead to 30 days, one year of supervised release, and 60 hours of community service.

He said he hoped she could pull her life together and that she “should not be judged by the worst mistake you have made in your life.”

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HEADLINE	12/17 Woman jailed; railroad track sabotage
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/bellingham-resident-sentenced-for-railroad-track-sabotage
GIST	<p>BELLINGHAM, Wash. (AP) — A Bellingham resident has been sentenced to 12 months and one day in prison for sabotaging railroad tracks near the U.S.-Canada border in Washington state just before a train carrying crude oil was due to pass through.</p> <p>Ellen Brennan Reiche of Bellingham was sentenced Friday in U.S. District Court in Seattle for committing an act of violence against a railroad carrier.</p> <p>Reiche was convicted in September for placing a device that interferes with train signals on the tracks apparently as part of a campaign to protest construction of a pipeline across British Columbia.</p> <p>Reiche's co-defendant, Samantha Brooks, pleaded guilty in July to a terrorist attack and violence against a railroad carrier.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 Arrested: teen made threats against high school
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/teen-arrested-for-allegedly-making-threats-against-franklin-high-school
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Seattle Police say they arrested a 17-year-old girl Friday for making threats against Franklin High School.</p> <p>On Wednesday, classes were canceled at the High School because of social media threats.</p> <p>Police say the teen admitted that the threats were a hoax. She was released to her parents and police are forwarding the case to the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office for review.</p>
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HEADLINE	12/17 DEA: drug dealers turn to tech—and emojis
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/addicted-america/drug-dealers-turn-to-tech-and-emojis-as-it-looks-to-snare-young-customers-dea-says
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Federal law enforcement officials say drug dealers are turning to technology to lure new customers to their illegal narcotics operations.</p> <p>The criminals are reaching out to potential customers through social media and emojis to build their clientele.</p> <p>Sam Louie, a parent, said he had no idea that drug dealers have become so resourceful as they look to push illegal drugs online and to anyone with a smart phone.</p> <p>"I was totally clueless (and) had no idea this even existed," he said. "These could be anything my kid is used to. Super Mario Brothers, Dragons. These are all innocuous and innocent looking emojis (that) I would not give a second thought to."</p> <p>Frank Tarentino, the special agent in charge with the Drug Enforcement Administration's Seattle office, said parents should be speaking to their children about the dangers.</p> <p>"It's almost like a cryptic language these drug trafficking networks are using," he said. "You have to have the conversation with your children."</p> <p>Tarentino said a reference guide has been created that aims to raise awareness for parents, caregivers, educators and social media companies about how drug dealers are using social media and technology to reach underage customers.</p> <p>"They're getting more and more successful in terms of spreading out their different platforms and expanding their network," he said.</p> <p>The DEA and law enforcement partners nationwide recently seized thousands of pounds of fentanyl and millions of fake prescription pills. Many cases involved drug traffickers using some of the most popular social media platforms to draw in customers, including Tik Tok, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.</p> <p>Groups that work to curb drug use said they are having a hard time keeping up with the new approaches.</p> <p>"I think we're having some difficulty really trying to understand," said Bonnie Wang, who works with WAPI Community Services.</p> <p>"We're working on advocacy, (and) getting funding so we can do a lot more prevention work," she said.</p> <p>Others acknowledge the new challenges they face.</p>

	<p>“Social media has taken drug dealing to an entire different level,” says Pastor Lawrence Boles, who now leads Redeemed by the Blood Community Church of God in Christ in Kent but had sold drugs before he turned his life around. Don't expect that your kids are so good that they won't fall victim to this.”</p> <p>With the holiday break around the corner and more free time for his son, Louie says he now knows how to be on guard.</p> <p>“So if I do see these emojis, i can be more aware, have a conversation with him, and or other parents and children who may be impacted by this.”</p> <p>Federal authorities said they have seized a large quantity of fentanyl, enough to kill every person in the country. King County and Seattle remain the epicenters in the Pacific Northwest for fentanyl traffickers.</p>
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